Welcome to ...

OUR PERFECT WORLD!

By K.M. Dehmelt

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ACT I: THE GORGEOUS STATE OF THINGS!

1

My partner's job and mine is to find the people who are *too* human and make them see true logic. The guy we're supposed to be investigating today is a big fan of breakfast, so we get to the restaurant where he's been this morning (according to the tracker system) intentionally late, as usual. Montserrat, my baldheaded, tan skinned, cigarillo smoking compatriot, scans the line of cars in front of the diner for a 2022 Toyota Carrolla. This guy, the one who we're supposed to "talk with," is one of the guys who remembers when America was truly great, not from some vision plastered on a digital advertisement in his Bedset or a song sculpted by our muses with artificial hands; he came up during the time when people could still make something of themselves with nothing but an Ivy League degree and a daytime job to pair with their night classes. He's one of those people who seemed, at least at one point, to understand how the world moves forward and leaves things behind, but it's as though he decided that he, in his 240 pound circumference, balding hair, modest chuck taylor shoes and job as a manager of one of the most respected cybersecurity independent contractors in the area for a while, he decided to sit down at this humble diner this morning in the countryside and say, "You know, Chausser, Montserrat, the Government, their friends, they're all completely full of shit. The personal computer? I can crank my wand to that. Women who are half human, half AI? *That shit* is morally wrong!" And apparently the dude's a divorcee whose only son is currently at the KingDom just over the grassy dunes outside of town for some sort of escape he's booked on his father's wallet.

By the time I get the sentence out, Montserrat – lit cherry blazer in hand, reeking of his own aftershave mixed with the curling smoke which I don't give a shit that's filling up the interior of our 2025 nightmare black escalade, because, well, *they'll wash it* – is choking. "Que mierda tio," he says, choking in his dress shirt and reaching for his jacket draped in the back. "A que puente en la historia hasta las 'crusades'" – he air quotes it – "fue un gringo que no ha entendido la verdad de humanidad: es un camino constantemente frente!"

"Shut your fucking mouth," I tell him, taking one of my camel blues, the kind that still taste like the original but we've managed to mitigate by our AI-cracked genetic protectors against the same kind of cancer that killed my mother. "Now we're gonna walk in here and the bots are gonna tell us that he's the next in line to the throne or some shit for being rebel enough in retirement to say *humanity is better*."

“Joderisimo,” Montserrat says, then shoots me a darting glance of his eyes via the center console without hesitating. In English, his voice singsongs through the brisk morning air and the pumping conditioners from the center console: *I can’t stand the lack of vision / everybody wants to rule the world*.

Two clicks on either side. Pistols on the hip, phone scanners in hand, he was here less than an hour ago and the whole point is, if someone in there is on his side, they’ll let him know we need to talk to him. My boss pings me with a blip on the screen similar to a text message, his hybrid mind having already envisioned a world where we bust the guy today, strap him to a barstool, and ask him to count the stars for us to tell us where to go backwards. And, speaking of the hybrids, from this distance away from the plated glass window outside SASHA’S DINER, they might even have both bots *and* joiners working the joint this early …

Our presence – door chimes whipping from the lobby, two types of totally non-cancerous tobacco fumage propagating the air filled with bacon grease jumping off the oven and the clattering of silverware – is pretty wild. We don’t need to display our IDs for people to know our job is different, and Montserrat, despite being a chatty cathy behind the passenger or driver’s seat, is one of those people who doesn’t say much. If you didn’t know him and threw him in a leather instead of a threadbare you might think he’s here to rob the place, but the bot maitredee, with her regulatory strict waist and her maroon, plated eyes set in her lithe sockets better than the windowpane behind us with a different tint immediately makes a calculation in her head to both smile like we’re her parents and that we’re *government affiliated*. Whatever the fuck that means, honestly; I tap my pocket to make sure my wallet’s there, and we’ll throw this one on the card that they give us in order to pay for shit as we take a seat at the rotating stools along the counter. I get my cream and sugar, Montse gets his black, and we get ready to have a legitimate interaction with the woman behind the bar. Despite being in a washed rose polo shirt with SASHA’S written on her right breast, I imagine her, amidst the blinking automaton waiters and the families enjoying their breakfast – some skinned, some shopped, as they say nowadays – as a gladiator in the arena. In earshot of her, I ask Montserrat, “Leo, remember the days when pouring coffee, scraping gristle, and serving eggs could put your way through college?”

He snorts into his coffee mug like he sneezed. The woman, who is at least mid thirties with crow’s feet and yellowed teeth from the “regulars,” smiles and lets out something between a sigh and a deflation. “Old timers,” she says, her voice tired despite the early hour. It’s at this point I slide a picture of our perpetrator across the counter as though I’m folding a hand

in holdem, asking her if she'd seen this kind of guy, and when she notices the insignia across my collar, some combination of a checkmark and a target for those new to this whole shebang, that same weary cheeriness flips to a setting of scaredness and suspicion.

"You just missed him," she says, caught between turning towards the maitreedee floating customers to their early Saturday seats and the kitchen, where hands meant to look like normal skin move the dishes down the washing line on the opposite side of the grimy tiled room. "What did you say you wanted?"

"His plate," I ask, shelving his picture in my suit pocket. "There are extremely advanced investigatory procedures we can utilize to confirm his identity."

Leo decided to put his shades on, but when our waitress whips the door open, stalks to the back, and intercepts the dude's plate right before it gets sent into the detergent and hot water abyss of cleanliness, he's decided to put his shades on and get ready for Will Smith's long awaited return to the Pennsylvania suburbs by the time she hustles back to us. Naturally, one of the families at the booth nearest to the door behind Leo and I have gotten suspicious, so much so that when their bot waiter distributes their breakfast, trying to maintain that simple dance of movement inside the shop which we were threatening by our interjection, I think the youngest of the "flesh" kids across from the hybrid mom (they must drive a sweet car) is actually trying to snapchat us. If he did, he would've captured Leo picking up the plate, turning the crusted catchup discus to the side, and then, right underneath his faded moustache and spy glasses, licking the crusted shit like he's a dog late to supper. Our waitress, bless her heart, gags like *she* just swallowed *her* cigarette, and, aghast, asks, "sir, was that *really* necessary?"

Leo smacks his lips and turns to me, nodding his head. "It's a match!"

"Excuse me," a deeper voice says. Uh oh, it's our second *manager* of the morning. Dude looks like he tried out for the Philadelphia Eagles and still has the waterweight from bruising after being trucked. "Can I speak to you two gentlemen privately?"

Shit. Dude tells us the family behind us actually *was* recording, and now there's rumors about the town of Government drones sweeping in to abduct the hottest country loving daughters and use them as templates for the next suite of robo wives, or something. Thankfully, I tell him my name is Darrell Chausser and indeed, I am a subcontractor through the government whose job is to investigate terrorists. My partner, Leonardo and I, are on the tail of the kind of guy who might rape an animal in his backyard because he hasn't had adult supervision in forty years, and is also the type of man who might want to make the sexually attractive robot at the front of the

building go back to the scrap heap just to make another ‘person’ stand the post and earn juuuuust enough money to know how fucked they are. He starts apologizing rapidly, his chin shaking a bit and the hairs vibrating like a backscratcher set to the wrong frequency, and so by the time Leo and I are exiting the office to hear the gunshot, with the waiter who served the family who recorded us now twitching in circuitry and blood on the floor, a sense of order gets immediately restored by the manager interrupting our explanation to call the cleanup crew.

Nonchalantly, and with us fully caffeinated and in tow, he walks over to the family who recorded Leo’s plate licking and asks, “what seemed to be the issue, sir?”

The dad, a guy in an icy blue flannel and wreaking dude musk with old spice, says that the sausage for his daughter, sitting next to his hybrid wife, was undercooked to the point it might’ve hurt her. He had a decision to make, and he tells the manager he applied one of our Perfect Principles: whenever you get the chance to slow down the machine, speed it up. In layman’s terms, this guy who actually *listened* in high school (thus the supped up wife and super suped car outside worth more than four years of a human maître dee’s life, for those keeping score) could’ve either shot the chef or shot the server, and since shooting the automaton chef would’ve put the whole place behind, and since this server didn’t check the food and catch the error (*buenissima*, Leo whispers, at the guy’s free flowing bullshittery) he decided to exercise his right to perfection by blowing the waiter to shit. Naturally, nobody stopped nor cared, and he actually gets an atta-boy from the neighboring booth as the robot’s still twitching on the tiles, saying, “I’ve been shot for being less than perfect, I’ve been punished for my sins” over and over again. It’s at this point I decide to broach the topic of his son’s rather invasive recording of our investigation by clapping my badge down on the table with the checkmark and the target, and the father literally rips his son’s myPhone out of his hands and deletes the video. The kid, perplexed, and the mom, reddening like she actually gives a damn and isn’t programmed to do so like the rest of us, says, “I’m sorry, sir, it just looked funny.”

“I understand,” I tell him, clapping him on the shoulder while Leo watches the mix of wires and blood get pushed into the cleaning bin by the person who gets paid to do that. “Say, do you want to hear something *funnier?*”

“Shoot,” the kid says.

I laugh, my mouth open, the father and the daughter following suit, as I make a finger gun at the kid’s face amidst the squeegee sound of ‘blood’ being cleaned off the tiles by the mopping man. “Imagine,” I tell him, putting five fingers up in front of him. “That there are people in our perfect,

pristine world, in our beautiful, immaculate country, who think that *that* guy," I point at the hybrid who took the fall still twitching on the floor. "Should've been a *person*."

"Pfffffft," the father says, flecks of egg and sausage, the ones properly done, flicking onto the table. "Yeah, that's why I appreciate your work, we've got some *real* whackos who live out here in the countryside."

"Your wife's incredible," I tell him, pointing at the buxom blonde, blue eyed, low topped wearing full-bot sitting across the table from him. "What model is she?"

"Last year, so realistic it's like you're dreaming!" the straight shooter says to me, the wife batting her mascara'd eyelids upon command with nary a click nor shift in her seat. I smirk and raise my still indented ring finger on my right hand, tapping it with my pinkie, and tell him I'm due for one myself after busting this guy. At mentioning our perpetrator, the guy finds a way to be useful again after correcting the inefficiency earlier, and tells me what we already know, yes indeed, there are people like the guy we're after, yes indeed, he was in here, and he's, after apologizing for being so messy in his whiplash reaction earlier – at which point I tell him to never apologize for violence when its positive, good sir – that he's glad there's people like I and dear Leo who keep us moving forward despite those who betray us by moving back to where we've been, already.

Tapping my mobile device, I tell him, "My boss is sure to have heard that, and I'm one step closer to my own slice of heaven thanks to good citizens like him." After ensuring the kid's deleted the shit off the phone, we bid them adieu, step around the cherry stained tiles, and make our way back to the vehicle with our target's country-ass address already punched into our navs – and by the way, for anybody wanting to become a billionaire, find a way for us to do our jobs without having to be so thorough about shit we've already known, but before I even say it to Leo, I remember my boss's reasoning: *our faith, above all, must be in the process*.

Ignition flicked, cigarette lit, second half of cigarillo between Leo's teeth, we pull out from the diner and travel back in time …

2

THEY GO TO THE DUDE'S COUNTRY HOUSE AND INTERROGATE THE NEIGHBORS

Now, listen, I'm not the type of guy who determines whose a "terrorist." My boss is way better at doing that than I am. The point of our presence in the diner, and now on these country bumpkin baha streets in what might as well be a tank, where people can't *afford* the robo wives, is to show that this country cares about all its people, whether they be flesh, metal, or both of those. This may come as a shock to you, but there was a time I could've seen myself sitting across from mister Gerald Lieber II, our

Germanic target's full name, and lambasting people for being so quick to leave others behind … before I, as the brutal indentation on my ring finger may indicate, learned that what I thought was bravery was truly, purely foolishness. The older ones, who typically vote one way or the other, no judgment from me, are the ones for whom our striving towards perfection rings as the most invasive. And who can blame them? We go from a place where you at least have a shot at seeing more than four cars every mile to a place where the natural foliage (what's left of it, of course) forms almost a curtain from the outside world. I'm half expecting to see a school of nymphs frolicking across the blacktop. But for me, being my complexion, those are the kinds of thoughts I have, whereas Leo, my trusted partner of nearly two years at this point, has stopped smoking entirely, and instead interrogates, with squinted eyes, nearly every homestead or colonial or beaten down duplex we pass amidst the trees like his own eyes are laser sighted beacons into whoever might be firing for *real* behind those doors.

"Has visto la pelicula *Thanksgiving*?"

"Which one?" I ask him. "The one where the ghouls kill everyone around the table, or the horror movie lived by those savages who couldn't irrigate?"

"Ambos," Leo says. "La persona que viva en esa casa," it's one of those that has flags from that war in the 1850s splayed across the front porch. "Es una persona que yo creo que come hombres en su tiempo libre."

"No, no, Leo, that's not original," we've managed to pinpoint the country house, with red panels and a delapidated fence that was supposed to stop some kind of quadraped animal from somehow squeezing through gaps bigger than those in our collective memory. "The people around here, as I know them, are typically pleasant when they're not worshipping the devil and attempting to set us so far backwards we climb up our own assholes."

"Exacto," Leo says. "And these are the types of white people who shoot their *own* children."

"You know more about that than I do, partner," I tell him. We roll to a stop along the wheat field roadline across the street from the deserted abode. "As we know, there's absolutely nothing wrong with shooting children if they haven't demonstrated potential by a certain age."

"Si, pero your *own* children," Leo says, removing his shades. "I'm just saying, this guy, from his profile, seems like the kind of dude who would shoot his *own* son. It's just not right!"

"Well, according to what we know, he could do that and a whole lot more," I say, and the thought of the guy, from what we know of him, does indeed bring a little rustle to my hands while taking in the country palace betwixt the open, sunlit acreage in front of us. The story goes a bit like this:

Gerald is supposed to be a widower with a son who is trying his best to kill himself before his 23rd birthday via weed, cigs, cigarillos, beers, cocktails, and robotic intercourse now readily available to the masses. However, that women inside that house standing at the kitchen sink is *alive*.

"Jesus H Metaverse Surfing *Christ*," I say, flipping quickly through my document logs on my phone since they won't pay for visors without a fistfight on the board. "Who is *that*?"

"Oh goodness me," Montserrat says, drier than a baked flytrap. "The documentation center was *incorrect* about something?"

I blow a quick puff of smoke out the window, hoping the fading canopy of leaves above us will make us seem like an Uber or DoorDash order in a place where the closest thing to public transport is the school bus. "This is insane," I say. *Wife died 2015; breast cancer. Buried at Presbyterian Church of Zion Ridge, Pennsylvania. Date of Digital Reanimation: December 25th, 2023.* "Listen, Montse, I can understand the kid having some trouble dealing with having a digital version of his mother on a codex that his father jerks to, but if *that*," I point at the window on the side of the colonial, obscured by the shaded shingles and solar panels affixed to the sea of black like a raft on a midnight ocean. "If *that*, if *she*, is either a flesh and blood woman or a hotbot, imagine having your own father *living* in that memory *and* doing this!" There's absolutely no way a man of Gerald's complexion maintains those perennials outside, either, but before I can critique the man's lack of traditionally universal gardening techniques, Montserrat puts an index finger to his lips and throws his shades on.

"She's at the window."

And indeed she is, peaking out the shutters from what must be the kitchen in a way where the overcast light cloaks her pale face. From here, it's possible to tell that she's either got blonde or brunette hair versus the black of the deceased Mrs. Lieber, and, what's more than that, it's clear she's not only spotted us, but the phone in her hand and sparkler thin frown on her face, plus the glances at our vehicle, has me thinking she's done us a solid and called the local cops on us. Sighing, I ash the rest of my good for you Camel, put the window up, advise Montserrat to treat her with kid gloves to avoid the perpendicular bullshit that'll be involved if she escalates, and then, when I flash my check and crosshair, platinum and gold plated badge, she barely has time to hang up the phone when I see *her* gun trained on us from the window as though she's about to blow holes in a koy pond from her side window sniper post.

"Woah, woah, Mrs. Lieber!" I shout, extending my hands up, badge in one, phone in other.

“Stay right where you are!” She calls, opening the window and hiding behind the screen with her other hand while quivering with the pistol in the other. “You’re on private property!”

“Mrs. Lieber -”

“That is not my name!” She shouts, higher pitched, jarring. “How do you know who lives here!”

“The name is on the mailbox!” Montserrat says.

“And who are *you*?” She shouts at my friend, perhaps the first darkly pigmented person to set foot on these grounds without an explicit function to be performed in decades. “You aren’t from around here!”

“’Here’ is relative,” Montserrat says.

“Excuse me?”

“I said,” Montserrat says. “*Here* is relative.”

“I’m not related to you!”

“What he means is that we are indeed from the area,” I attempt to explain.

“I know exactly who you are,” she says, her voice quivering a bit behind those imaginary walls of her home. *Don’t mention the facsimile metaverse dome thing or we’ll be going home in cardboard boxes*, I tell myself.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Tabitha, and if I had any sense in me, I’d blow you cocksuckers to *shit*!” Two things: one, I can tell she doesn’t curse too much with how she hisses *cocksuckers*, and second, that clicking sound was totally the safety disengaging.

“You aren’t a big fan of the government?”

“I’m not a big *fan* of people who want to replace humanity with AI!”

“Ah,” I tell her. “Well, if you want to have a debate about the progress of our species, I would much prefer you to lower the firearm so we can discuss this reasonably.”

“What the hell is reasonable about a man who you love having sex with his dead wife every night?”

“That’s a personal question,” I tell her, trying to crack a smile. “Tabitha, would you be so kind as to lower the firearm? While we attempt to be as diplomatic as possible, we are indeed extensions of the federal government through the Strive program.”

“And that’s why, if I had balls, I’d blow you to shit!” Tabitha says. She jumps. Her phone is buzzing again, but thankfully, as she picks it up and starts yammering about the devil standing in her driveway, said gravel behind us turns with a couple wheels making their entrance to our Shakesperean plight: Tabby had it in her mind to call the *local cops!*

From the looks of them – white dude in his 40s who was probably a footballer, arms popping out underneath the baby blue fabric, second white dude trainee young and much skinnier – these people are no strangers to what's become the Lieber and Tabitha residence. Upon their arrival, Tabitha dropped that gun to her side out of sight faster than a deer racing from a misfire, and the two cops seem to wonder why Montserrat's hands are still raised while mine's extended towards them. Rather than shake it, however, the older one regards me with a detached glare colder than black ice.

"Good morning, Gentlemen," The cop says, Pennsylvania drawl intact. "Would you mind identifying yourselves to my partner and I?"

"Sure thing," I say. "My name's Darrell Chausser, this is my partner Leonardo Montserrat, we're here on behalf of the investigative arm of the Strive program doing a bit of poking into the Leiber residence." He examines Leo and mine's badges nonchalantly, as the screen door from the slightly elevated porch creaks open behind us through the brisque air.

"And what business do you have here at the Lieber residence?"

"Well," I say, Tabiha's sockless sneaker footsteps gingerly walking through the grass. "To put it simply, and just so Ms. Tabitha-"

"Walsh!" she shouts, correcting me, bathrobe just a tinge brighter baby blue than the boys in front of me. "These men threatened me!"

"Hold on a moment, Ms. Walsh," the cop says. "These men are Government employees."

"I don't give a damn!" she says. "This is my boyfriend's property!"

"Right, but Ms. Walsh, as I'm sure you're aware, your boyfriend's currently under investigation for organizing an overthrow of the United States Government." I tell her.

"Bullshit!" she says, her aqua blues looking towards the local boys for some help. None's coming, though, with the head officer crossing his arms and now pivoting his legs a bit more towards her rather than us. "If anybody's trying to desecrate the United States, its these tresspassers right here!"

"Alright," I tell her. "Now that you're talking rather than pointing to shoot-"

"Prove it!" she says, curtly, a fire in her tone. "Tell me what Gerry did!"

"He's currently the subject of an ongoing investigation-"

"So you don't have *anything!*" she says, tears welling at her eyes corners. While she and I are still dicking around in front of the cops, Montserrat has taken the liberty of walking towards the end of her driveway towards what appears, on the outside, to be a dilapidated shed. However, as I notice my partner walking towards it, leatherbacked coat close to his back and his bald head turning partially twice around to make sure Tabby isn't

packing heat under that robe, still, there *does* appear to be a strangely mechanical light emanating from the thing –

"He's *trespassing!*" Tabitha says, pointing at Montserrat down the driveway. It's at this point the elder cop explains to me we need to show some proof of our reason to being here, our word being juxtaposed on the scales of 'justice' with the fact Tabitha is technically correct, and anti-enlightenment, counter progressives do indeed have the right to privacy. And this is the part of my job, I must confess, which I hate the *absolute* most: calling my boss from the scene of an ongoing investigation to prove the expedience by which people like him use the levers of the systems to slice their way, metaphorically and literally, to what they want. I tell the cops to give me a minute, whip out my phone, and dial the number I hate dialing, unable to hide my sighs and the squinting of my brows as I type 137024 and hit dial.

Please be gentle, please be gentle.

"What?" My boss answers, his voice crystal clear, with a man's force and a tone Tabitha might call womanly with how shrill it is.

"Local LE is here," I say, nodding my head at the cops.

"Tell them that the Metaverse exists in places outside Pennsylvania and that what people do on the internet isn't limited to their zip code."

"Is there a way to put that more nicely?"

"I don't give a fuck," my boss says. "We've got this guy, from the fascilime and the underroads, literally attempting to round up the locals and assassinate not only artificials, but hybrids, so I don't give a shit what his two bit girlfriend, who we now know exists and isn't being chained to a PC tower, tells you when she's playing chicken with my agents with a firearm."

"Do you want me to put you on speaker?"

"I want you to get into that shed that Leo's poking towards, I can see him plain as day from the top down, same way I saw Carrie Underweather blare that muzzle at you from the window. If she doesn't cut that shit out I'll make her radiator explode."

Ah yes: the wonders of having access to grid power with probable cause when the people who you're targeting are fucking anti-civs. The cops are starting to get nervous, as well, because they at least understand, from their hands on their hips and their glances at Tabitha, that the ladder climbs upward, despite the other ways the world's changed, and so I ask my boss to succinctly explain to the cops what we're about to do, which does indeed have a court order attached to it. Approximately fifteen seconds after handing the senior officer the phone, he's then looking at me with a new sort of reverence and, despite being the same height, the glint in his eyes is as if he's looking up at me the same way, if everyone could understand or wanted to understand how the world today works, the open morning air

between the trees could be seen as a web of signals, as if everything we whisper is the way that people pray. My boss isn't telling him *that*, however, and he and his partner actually step closer to Tabby and allow me to follow Montse towards the shed without delay. I can guarantee my boss started with his identification number for where *he* works and *who* he works for, and then said something like *I'm the civilian equivalent of a frontline general* while giving them his full name, along with the name of the judge that said what Mr. Gerald does on his free time isn't his alone. Granted, in a land of joggers and bikers and pickups, this splintered wooden door in front of us *does* indeed seem to be a shed, but Montserrat (and our overhead intel) was enough to let us know that there's something in there Gerald probably *also* hasn't shown his wife, and now from the background she's hearable pleading with the cops in a voice shriller than my bosses not to *punish* her for having to let *us* get access to *her master's* shed.

"It's about to get weird, isn't it?" I ask Montserrat.

He sniffs. "Do you smell that?"

"Don't lick whatever's in here," I tell him. My watch flashes, with my boss having texted me a code to override the lock which he must've gotten from Gerald's messages, since committing and organizing domestic terrorism makes people forfeit some of their permissions in a rather unseemly situation like this, and the door cracks open with Tabitha's protests echoing around us in the background like a gale broken by the sturdy back of Montserrat's leather, patented jacket …

4

First surprise: Mrs. Leiber's hotter dead than she was alive. If you're unfamiliar with the ascent or descent of metaversal technology, looking at it from either up or down, it's as though God and Satan, if you're a Christian, decided to have a coding competition, but thankfully, the laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania prevented the man from using her real name. And so upon finding dear Gerry's Spectacle headset on a satin pedestal in the center of his dilapidated shed, our boss's *heads up, its weird* warning was enough to pique our interest. But the problem is, the musty room, which is essentially a survivalist's cabin (threadbare bed, mounds of canned supplies, a solar powered shower, stove, and charging port for Mrs. Leiber's *missing* post-split reincarbation) also has some documents that scream *this is above your pay grade, Duncan* at me as the camera in the upper right hard corner of the insulated wooden side twinkles blue and follows us.

I wave at it.

"Greetings, Gerry!" I say, showing my badge with the checkmark and crosshair on it with my Bluetooth earpiece direct wired to my boss. "We're

entirely within our legal grounds to be here, and I must inform you that your internet activity, as you might have imagined, is currently the subject of a rather intensive investigation by the Government of the United States."

The camera doesn't respond, doesn't blink, doesn't rotate. Instead, the whirring of the devices – Razer PC tower humming green, television monitor that takes up the entire wall, the Spectacle itself, the $4000 model, sitting in the center like the holy grail in Indiana's cave – counts as our answer. The local authorities have convinced Tabitha not to off herself in the background, and my expert partner is currently sniffing the towel hanging next to the self-powered shower stall.

"It's not soap," he says, eying it suspiciously. "We're dealing with a spunk philosopher."

"A what?" Thinking his accent might've screwed my hearing while knowing to blame him is unfair.

"A *spunk* philosopher," Montserrat says. "Hay un calendario directamente al lado del humidor solar que tiene mas de cien fotos de 'Mrs. Lieber.'" He's pointing to a calendar in the style of Sports Illustrated with a hundred AI-generated photos of the same woman, with absolutely spotless, porcelain skin with the RGB hex combination for *snow*, apparently, with her posing topless (yet covered by her hands!) on a beach somewhere in the Caribbean, pink skies, teal water, another with her and him standing next to (of all people) Arnold Schwarzenegger, who, in Gerald's world, has become POTUS and launched a colony on Andromeda, or some shit, and (get this) there's even one of him in the center of a dozen women – some with the same white hot skin, none darker than a cup of lightly creamed morning coffee, as though he used a pornography category directory and materialized *brunette, blonde, redhead* - with him in the center of a forested grotto of some kind wearing a green vest with black pants. They've got wires around different parts of their body with bulbous assets totally revealed a-la video game warrior women characters, domesticated Amazons or some shit, and the point where it goes from laughably absurd to downright disgusting is the fact the dude's got some type of *bible* in his hand.

"This is the largest investment in masturbation I have ever codified," is what my boss tells me. "Please tell me there's a Bible in the room."

"Voy a buscar la biblia porque todos de nosotros necesitamos que leerlo ya," Montserrat, who, to the best of my knowledge, is a pagan, says to me. However, when looking at Gerard's 'library," which is a stack of physical, actual books, we don't find a Bible, a Quaran, a Torah … but instead, the closest thing to it is a book at the very end labeled *Natural Revelation*, which has the same thick spine, the same holy typeset lettering

of a sacred book, but also the grotesque and flaking cover of something well used and wholly –

"Code red," my boss says in my ear. "Gerald's back outside and he's got a shotgun."

A car door slams, and a guttural howl of some kind from outside plus the roar of a heavyset man screaming *WHO IS ON MY PROPERTY?* Causes Montserrat and I to cease our investigation without being able to … oh my god he's got Mrs. Lieber *with* him!

We step outside into the sunlight, slightly brighter than the artificial, aboveground bunker, and find ourselves saying *WOAHWOAHWOAH* as the click-clock of the shotgun in Mr. Lieber's hands, his posture perfect in his falltime coat, which trails behind his khaki pants and hunter's style boots, his glasses perfectly clear with one eye closed and the shotgun floating back and forth between Montse's chest and mine.

"Mr. Lieber, allow me to explain," I say. My boss is erupting on the other end at the fact that the cops just left Tabitha inside. In the car Mr. Lieber's driving, some black BMW sports sedan worth more than a normal house, his full-AI wifebot is sitting in the passenger seat with the complacent smile of someone watching the morning news at the prospect of her husband killing us.

"I want the United States Government off my property," he says, calmly. The man looks younger than in his previous pictures, all 58 years of his snarl depressed into a thin line and his receding brown hairline under his bowler hat, 1920s style, a cap of its own. "No have absolutely no business interrupting my religious practices."

"Excuse me?" I ask, shooting Monsterrat an uncertain chuckle-sigh. "Your … *religious* practices?"

"What's your name, son?" He asks me.

"My name is Duncan Chausser, this is my partner Leonardo Montserrat, we have reason to be here due to your 'religious practices' potentially veering into the realm of domestic terrorism."

"*Potentially*," he says, winking and revealing a row of artificially whitened teeth. "The same way, having not seen any of your identification, there's *potential* for this buckshot to rip through your chest, Mr. Chausser."

"Correct, but then you'd *surely* have murdered an affiliate agent of the United States Government whose job is to investigate metaversal maladies, as I'd call them."

"Well, you must be one of those people who has access to everything," he says, moving his left hand up to his own ear. "I'm merely standing my ground in the face of two strangers who apparently tracked my own movements earlier today."

The fact he knows that means he knows a lot. “Mr. Lieber, I’m not attempting to infringe on your rights to practice whatever form of Christianity you so choose-”

He *whips* the shotgun towards the sky and discharges it in an unholy crack. Montserrat and I both fly to the blacktop like two birds who just caught collateral, and then the gun slaps the blacktop as well still smoking from the barrel. He’s walking towards the house, where Tabitha’s probably still window peaking us, and in the meantime, AI Mrs. Lieber gets out of the BMW – wearing a backless, James Bond woman style dress and with what sound like metal pistons jamming into the blacktop driveway – and picks up the shotgun, dusts it off, and throws it over her shoulder, bare and temperature free in the morning cold.

“Where are you going?” I shout after Mr. Lieber.

“I’ve had *enough!*” he screams, stomping up the porch himself before turning around. “I am consulting my attorney to broach the proceedings of unfair persecution by the Government against a man simply attempting to save humanity from people like *you!*”

“Gerald,” the ‘woman’ says, her voice singsongy like a bird and too perfect, too pure. “You are such a brave man for surviving *unfair targeting!*”

“Alright,” I say, the cuts on my palms smarting. “I don’t know what sort of masochistic rituals we’ve stumbled upon, here, but Mr. Lieber, the reason for our presence here today involves your son.”

“What about the little bastard?” Mr. Lieber asks, having gotten what appears to be a gimlet from Tabitha inside the door, pressing his old-fashioned cell phone to his ear. “Go harass him instead.”

“Boy’s too much like his mother,” Not Mrs. Lieber says to us, smiling so politely she could slice a man’s throat. “The machines have *gotten* him.”

The mindfuck of watching a woman’s AI-replacement insult the woman as the man who supposedly wants to save humanity from *things like her* is too much for Monsterrat, who is attempting to cough away a laugh while checking out Mrs. Lieber’s robotic ass.

“Stop it!” Mr. Lieber barks from the porch. “All you people do is infringe on my *property!*”

“Your calendar with her is very nice,” Monsterrat says, throwing up an okay hand. “Can we read your Bible?”

“Why?” he calls to us, muttering something lost to the wind as well about the line being busy for top clients before stomping down the porch again. “I know everything about your program and can appreciate your concern, Agent Chausser, Agent Dali, but I also know it’s in your best interests, as you’ve been doing for a bit, to paint or portray me as some kind of villain.” He walks across the grass to us with his hands clamped behind

his back, each footstep intentional, slow and heavy enough to shake the ground if it were hollow. “And you’re going to tell me you don’t even *read*?”

In all my years investigating humans suspected of resisting the government, what makes my arms under my jacket break out in chills isn’t even the morning wind, it’s the fact that the guy is so *confident*. There’s an otherworldly air about him, as if the natural wind itself breaks around him at his current, and when those turbulent ocean eyes hit you like a wave struck by lightning, part of me feels as though we *are* the invaders. “Come on, Duncan, wake up and smell the coffee.” He says, reaching his arm around the Flesh™ covered Mrs. Lieber and slapping her ass, which jiggles like a botox pillow and causes her to flinch playfully with the shotgun inches from her ‘master’s’ skull. “Say,” Gerald says, leaning in. “When you took this transfer from Philly out into God’s country, Duncan, why didn’t you build a woman to make you feel at home?”

He’s looking at my ring finger, where the ghost of my own silver circle still makes me fear soap and water, sometimes. In that moment, I realize, that while Montserrat and I were following *him*, he’s been waiting for us, and there’s something deadly behind the way he grins, a landmine under sand. It takes a good four seconds of him looking at me over his glasses to realize he legitimately wants an answer.

“We’re here on business,” is what I tell him. “If you want to talk about the ethics of hybridization -”

“Hybridization is a complex process that involves legal, moralistic, sociological, and intercultural factors based on multiplicities of understanding placed in context and subjective experience balanced with objective metrics for success in balancing the human condition with the limitless power of automation.” LieberBot says, tilting her head up and then looking at Mr. Lieber and batting her almost-soundless eyelids with a shunk. “Shall I continue, SexyWolf?”

“Honey, don’t use my private screenname in front of these two gentlemen who are realizing the *depth* of my dedication to our natural world,” Mr. Lieber says. “If they don’t get the fuck off my property I’ll have you debate yourself in front of them about the ethics of showing up without an invitation.”

“Can I get one?” I ask him, my neck veins pulsing at how she’s *trained*. Montserrat looks as though I’ve ventured into insane white person territory too fast for him, but as Gerald raises both his eyebrows and checks with his wife, who only blinks because she wants to, Montserrat shrugs and then nods his head.

“On or off the clock?” Mr. Lieber asks. “Does Agent Braise want one too?”

“Of course he knows my name,” my boss says. “Take it from him.”

“I can hear him, you know,” Gerald says. “I’ve got my people at the courts and in the system and in places he knows about but cannot tell you due to payroll.”

“Just agree,” my boss says. “We’ll talk.”

“Listen,” I say, trying my best to not spit at the guy. “From what I know of you, you’re a man of honor and integrity when your son isn’t hopping around at virtual brothels.”

“You can have the headset,” Gerald says, opening his palm back to the very place he was about to kill us for *invading*. “It’s really all you need.” He reaches into his breast pocket and unfurls a piece of paper, as though he has business cards ready for every salaried dick who walks across his path. “If you want to talk to God, download this application.” He hands one to me, one to Montserrat, and then, without waiting for an order and with the BMW parked in the center of the driveway, rear bumper facing us, he tips his hat, guides the robot woman across the grass, and, over his shoulder, says, “Gentlemen, as you know, two is better than one, and each side keeps the other honest!”

The screen door slams. The wooden one locks with the turn of a key. My boss is exploding over the fact the dude’s lawyer apparently has told us *we’ll talk and you should GTFO unless you join us in paradise* or whatever, and, despite the fact I hate myself for it, my wallet is pulsing in my dress pants because now, for work, I need a headset…

5

startingOurPerfectWorld.exe

from the darkness, voices in conversation, floating around a high pitched chanting, female gregorians. It’s as though I’m a piece of driftwood or an ice flow moving towards a shoreline … then, in front of me, oak branches form an archway through which I’m moving, the center of which is a doorway of solid light. Using the sensory enhancers, I smell pinewood, along with the floating smoke of a bonfire, and my skin erupts in goosebumps in my apartment because I’m here: awash in a sea of smiling faces on either side of me, women, men, children of all ages, but mostly in the prime of their lives (20s, 30s, 40s) clap for me, dressed in white and blue and mahogany, like someone soaked the American flag true maroon. In the adulation, the glow of the smiles warming me in a way no heater in my decrepitly heated, single studio apartment in the pine barrens could, my face flushes, and my supervisor’s training in my brain – remember what’s real, don’t betray yourself – echoes to me, separated by that feeling like a person locked outside their own home.

The man standing on the wooden stage, as I feel I’m walking up four stairs with my customized dress boots and white khaki pants underneath me, guided by women wearing sun and moon and star laced iron and silver and

gold crowns in white gowns, might as well be God. But he isn't: his waistline's receded, his face is lithe, his eyes are piercing like azure sniper rounds and his smooth, gray specked shadow of a beard reminds me of how I'd see my dentist's from the chair, with the grove overhead nothing but a portal for the blazing, artificial sunlight raining down upon the stage. Gerald Lieber, the writer, founder, executor and mastermind behind the application OUR PERFECT WORLD, has fused NPCs, hybrids, and active users in harmony since 2024 and is pleased to have already had me accept his terms, conditions, and commandments in order to use an app already given a greater than 4.7 star rating and over two hundred rapturous reviews from the tri-state area … with the only negatives being, so far, that the application wasn't daily life.

"Welcome," Gerald beckons to me, his shock white priest robes with a Michaelangelo esque person reaching out and touching a Spectacle cord with a picture of a book in the center, surrounded by a circle and *asserting man's dominion over the spirit of the machine.* He's like a German-Austrian George Clooney, I can *smell* his Ralph Lauren. "You must be new here!" This draws a chuckle from the congregation, who have taken their shoes off and are sitting upon the grass in front of the stage from the edge of the risers to the tunnel, cross-legged, kids about to be read to at story time. "Tell me, what is your name again, dear brother?"

ENTER NAME: Duncan Taylor Chaucer

"And how old are you, dear Duncan?" his voice is bassy, fills my ears like pool water.

ENTER AGE: 42

"Forty two," he says, a seat fit for a king's tryouts, satin cushion and artisan crafted woodback, being brought to the center of the stage and placed there for me by two of the grinniest, bulkiest altar men I've ever seen. "Please, sir, you're only ten years younger than me! Have a seat, wouldn't you?"

I sit, the cushion underneath me and its rigidity clashing with the home couch I'm sitting on, the cold sweat not showing with all those expectant, artificial yet human eyes cast up on me from the crowd below. My stomach's knotting more than speech class at college, and Gerald, meanwhile, stands next to me as though he's a statue ready to catch the world dropped upon me. The women, despite my discipline and replaying the Phillies world-series winning strikeout, snare me, their beauty the artificial kind displayed on every *Playboy* from here to my father's magazine stack on the shitter, yet touchable, tangible, *real*.

"You can touch them, if you like, if you travel here with us," Duncan tells me, winking, noticing that I'd had my eyes trailing the behind of a blonde haired twenty something who batted her eyelashes at me in a way that felt *real*. Is it a person imitating a robot or a robot imitating a person, is it a

person imitating a robot or a robot imitating a person *does it MATTER ANYMORE?*
“Now, Duncan,” Gerald says, the singing having acquiesced into a meditative hum, balmy like a sensory deprivation chamber. “The first step on the path to transcending the modern world is to recognize what is real, what is fake, and what is possible. Do you understand?”
YES/**NO**
“Allow me to explain,” at this, Gerald opens a hand towards the congregation. “The persons you see here are those you’ve seen out there: former store clerks, veteran servers, current lawyers, retired legal assistants, copywriters without contracts, financial advisers turned spiritual consultants … the Christian Bible tells of a man who rises with an artificial chip in his hand, but I must tell you, in no uncertain terms, I’m no replacement for God, dear Duncan … as a matter of fact, I’ve never claimed to meet him.” He leans into me, and my mind flashes back to the time my parents transferred me out of Catholic school, the priest who told the story of the drunk driver to me through the iron booth and how everyone’s redeemable, and how all I could scream in my 11 year old head was *what about the kids he killed?* However, Gerald pats my shoulder with a father’s assuring grip, and, inches from my face, he’s beaming at me so forcefully his lips are curled with dimples. “The point is, in order to survive a world torn asunder by war, by famine, by genocide, by the great replacement of those who overlook humanity’s power, we must stand together as sisters, brothers, friends, and countrymen.”
The applause from the congregation hits me like a wave, and I forget to breathe, my heart hammering in my chest like the percussion accompaniment to the meditative trance music. He gestures with an open palm, pointed towards me, and I realize these gathered … beings … are clapping for my understanding, for *my* initiation.
“Next,” Gerald says, quieting the crowd like a surfer descending a wave. “Would you say the pain that brings you here is from a parent, partner, or child?”
Be as honest as you can without losing the mission
“A partner,” I say. Gerald nods, solemnly, and when he looks into my face, I see his eyes are watering.
“I’m aware,” he says, coughing, his throat only slightly obscured. “It was the loss of a beloved partner that turned my journey from a shared one to one where my higher purpose was revealed. Partners are the people deemed by the universe to be our refuges on this stormy planet, yet so often the same planet breaks them the way hurricanes shatter storm shutters and drown the best of our machinery.” He kneels down on his right knee, robe billowing behind him, and he takes my right hand in his own, clapping his

right above it with a firm, warm grasp and with his other underneath it.
“Tell me,” he asks, the conversation *just us*. “What was her name?”
Lie.
“Matilda,” I say, while her real name rings through the inside of my skull, the last bastion protected from the pull of Gerald’s magnetism.
“Matilda!” Gerald repeats, turning to the congregation going *aww*. He holds a finger to the sky, however, shushing them. “Now, Duncan, while your name *is* in the great American tradition, there is one aspect of our country which we are not allowed to do during initation.” The crowd hushes like he’s pulled out a weapon. “You *do* realize we know who you are, do you not?”
“Yes, sir,” I find myself telling him, apologizing like a kid caught in his girlfriend’s bedroom. “This particular subject is just sort of hard for me.”
“I understand,” Gerald says. “And you’ve done what you needed to: you see, Duncan, if I said you were the only liar among us I would be eaten alive by my own connected brethren,” the crowd shouts *true* and *valid*, *correct* and *one!* “The entire point of Our Perfect World is to advance past the lies we tell ourselves, and, more than that, the lies told to us by our parents, partners, and even, yes, our children.” At this, he pivots in his bare feet to the congregation with a stomp of his heel on the hardwood, and the congregation rises in the grass in tandem. “Beloved humans and those who have fused the advancements of man with the anchor of the human spirit,” he shouts. “What lies did the world tell us?”
“That we were valued, loved, and individual!”
“What are you here?”
“Valued, loved, and individual!”
“What lies did our parents tell us?”
“That they would be leaving a better world for their children.”
“What are we leaving here?”
“A better world for *our* children!”
“That’s right,” he says, turning around, pausing. “This server, this project, this place lives *forever*, Duncan,” he tells me, allowing the rapture to leak through in his irises getting small, his blinding white canines reaching out from his lips. “Stand, my brother, stand.”
I do as I’m told. The blood rushes to my head, and he grabs me to steady my gait. “Now,” he asks the congregation in a booming voice. “Why do we lie, dear friends?”
“To imitate what the world did to us.”
“And who can tell me why a man might lie about his partner?”
A woman in her mid 20s, dressed in robes which reveal her midriff, Grecian style, yet with her blonde curls pinned so tightly, so precisely, they could be welded together, raises her hand in the front row.
“Yes, dear Tabitha?”

“Because she hurt him the way that we’ve been hurt.”
The shock slaps me like a gust across my face, but Gerald catches me with a stupendous smile and tells me to turn towards him. Behind us, there’s a rustling at the end of the stage, as though a curtain of emerald leaves is about to be pulled back, the altar boys back there moving something, bringing something forward.
“Did she hurt you, Duncan?” Gerald asks, genuinely as the therapist who heard me sob about her tried to.
“Yes,” I tell him. “Yes, she did.”
“May I see your right hand, again?”
I raise it. He grasps it, tracing his uncalloused, intentional fingertips over the outline where my ring used to be.
“You do realize that, with the power of technology harnessed by hands more controlled, more spiritual, more holistic than those in power, currently, we can be the democratically advanced change the world needs to see, don’t you?”
I take my hand away from him, my heart in my throat, knowing I have to tell him no, finding myself confused.
“What was her name?” he asks me again. And now, with their eyes racing over me like a thousand red laser sights tied to guns that don’t need bullets, only teeth and tongues and brains behind them, I remind myself of the future: *going to the office, full report tomorrow, this is not all there is to be*.
“Bella,” I say, the syllables passing over my lips as though spice on open cuts. Then, Gerald beckons, and from behind me, up the stage, in-between, floats a woman who stops my heart: she’s wearing white the same as the day I married her, with her brunette curls flowing to her shoulders, those honeysuckle eyes and the lavender perfume floating to my nostrils like a drug taking over. At once, my brain screams ITS NOT HER and my heart howls IT IS, and by the time she’s standing in front of me, her eyes apologetic, light popping off them, Gerald stands between us like he’s ready to exchange new rings that would make my hand feel *whole* again.
“It’s …” I stammer, “It’s not …”
“Is it?” Gerald asks. “Don’t black out on me, Duncan, you *can* look her in her eyes.”
“She’s … this is …”
“I’m sorry,” my ‘ex-wife’ says, her tone *nearly* perfect. “Duncan, you’re the *world* to me.”
“What the *fuck*,” I say, those words I imagined, that I played while going to sleep in my own brain like a lullaby, causing my own insides, my soul, to call it that, to have an ovation louder than this entire forested revival and the four the next towns over. Gerald grabs me on both my shoulders, my lungs heaving, and he whispers to me, *why* couldn’t *it be her, Duncan?*

I can barely get the image of the day she left from my mind: the pill bottles left open on the bathroom counter, the way I heard her walk across the floor of our house, the one we had in Grimsville with the crib we never used, the letters from her attorney planted in the mailbox and the last time, how I kissed her, I felt nothing. And then *she* touches me, and while my eyes are leaking and my chest is heaving and my pants are currently in front of what must be four hundred people, something in me stirs in a way it never could back out there, where there's rain and cold and consciousness that feels a dimension short, in here.

"Do you want her?" Gerald asks me. "There's a private room for that."

"I'm sorry," she says again, stroking my left palm. "I love you, don't you know?"

Then, in front of me, a simple information box with a request for a five dollar donation towards Our Perfect World pops up: *a month's access to the congregation, tailored to your desires; lust, gluttony, greed, wrath, pain, and plenty all controlled in a confidential, community-based manner tailored to your own wants, needs, and transcending demons*. I tell myself, using my personal card, that it's for the investigation. Gerald makes sure, as we're whisked away from the clapping crowd, to reinforce the fact that it's usually $20, but that he and I are engaged in an *ongoing dialogue for the betterment of American society thanks to my courageous cooperation and the cooperation, as well, that we can expect from him to make a more sensible situation for all involved*. And, thanks to the sensory adjusters, when I find a bit of revelation, and right before ripping the headset off in shame and checking out with a muted *thank you* before vomiting into my bathroom toilet, forehead pressed against the porcelain, for a moment, three years ago, the current time, and the future I thought was dead, for a moment, was alive and pulsing, twisting and whole, in a way that for a moment could've been true *everything*.

NOTE FOR R2: add this description in as well: Sitting in forest, flatscreens, lenovos, acers around, bitcoin farm churning with graphics cards bridled like horses, they enter from the unenlightened, shadowed graves to treat me as their ORACLE!

-6-

In the low-lit, gray room, my boss sits in his perfect threadbare suit, crosshair and checkmark across his lapel, his arms folded, his mid-30s eyes striking blue, almost gray, and his hair pinned back in a flat top. Montserrat, eating French fries with locally bought Italian sausage draped in mayonnaise and ketchup, sits at the edge of the table, his eyes a tennis volley between us. I sit with my hands folded across the table. I've known

Robert Braise for the last four months since transitioning here, and never have I seen his smelted smile and hollow point eyes sharper than when he slides the black folder across the desk, labeled AGENT DUNCAN L. CHAUSSER in huge, red, *you fucked up* letters stamped on there, and tells me to open it.

I sigh immediately, glancing down for a millisecond at the PI-esque polaroid printouts of me "conducting unscrupulous investigative procedures" in my own home, considering the fact I consented to allow them to bug every inch of it *for my own protection*. They even screengrabbed my face at the conclusion of yesterday's exploratory work, my eyes rolled back in my headset, practically, tearstains where the Spectacle set indented its protective molding into my face. I tell him, as quickly as I can, that the entire point of me doing this was to *understand the experience*.

"What the *fuck* do you mean, Agent Chausser?" Agent Braise says, that falsetto whip-crack of a tone echoing around the private room we're in. "This guy's kid was at the cyber brothel yesterday and what, you decided to 'flex'," he air quotes, "on the entire family by engaging in cybernetic whore-screwing to prove you're a man like they are?"

"That's not the point, sir," I tell him, the space under my jaw pulsing and heated.

"Tell me the point, Duncan," Braise says, putting one foot up on the seat in front of him and crossing his suited arms over his kneecap. Dude's spit droplets landed in the center of the table, too, as Montserrat stares at them. "Tell me why I shouldn't be worried that we're going to have you defecting and funding Gerry's woodland circus in a heartbeat after the commitment you showed the mirage of your wife last night."

"It's a complex situation," I tell him. "He has multiple people under his control and apparently in his custody who are *truly* convinced this is the end of the world."

"Mhm," my boss says. "Tell me more. Explain it to me like I'm five."

"Well," I continue. "If people willingly, of sound mind and able body and robust spirit, sell their souls to Mr. Lieber, there is nothing, constitutionally, in my understanding we can do as a unit to stop them."

My boss raises his eyebrows, letting out a chortle. The fluorescents above us are suddenly aggressive in the silence, only their hum breaking the now pointed teeth smile from Braise's lock on my senses.

"Sigue," he says, turning his head towards Montserrat, who is sitting like the kid at the front of the class watching the teacher and their pet argue over capitals. "I can't wait to hear what Leo has to say about this."

"To be fair, Leo was not involved in my pursuit of Mr. Lieber's invitation."

“And why was that?” My boss asks. “You see, Duncan, we’re supposed to be investigating this guy and his woodland troupe under conspiracy to overthrow the Government of the United States. Why is that, Leonardo?”

“Because of the group’s business dealings as a collective and the monetary movements of some individuals,” he says, with an apologetic wrinkle of his own forehead in my direction.

“Exactly,” Braise points at him. “These people, from a psychological standpoint, Duncan, are some of the most depraved, disaffected, whitest-people-we-know in what *used* to be the heartland of America who are completely destitute from the fact people like you and people like Gerald himself can have as much copulation with the women of their dreams in *reality*,” he whistles and rolls his eyes after saying that world. “And you’re a credit card away from joining him in a Maserati alongside his BMW with a bot version of your wife ready to give you road head, from the looks of things.”

“Listen, sir,” I tell him, sighing again, reaching up to my collar with the cold sweat on my fingers enough to stain the inside of it. “I admit that there was a bit of weakness involved in me choosing to go private with the automation-”

“And that’s *another* thing,” Braise says, kicking the chair in with his boot, reaching into his own breast pocket, producing a perfectly unwrapped, imported cigarillo from his pocket. “How the hell is he able to get away without violating name and likeness of private citizens when it comes to this?” He turns to Montserrat, who has his hand raised, points the cigar at him, and says, “Don’t answer that, it’s rhetorical: *because he isn’t using the facial recognition software to apply their distinct, individual traits*,” he says it while chattering his right hand like a puppet before taking his lighter from his pocket, flicking it, lighting the cigar, inhaling while rolling his eyes backwards like the photo in the folder is reflecting up at him, then blowing the smoke towards the exhaust vent on the ceiling. “*Dammit*, Duncan, on a scale of one to nirvana, how much did it *feel* like your wife?”

“It did and it didn’t,” I tell him, honestly, feeling as though he’s my father who walked in on me. “But what he whispered to me right before I went with her was, why *couldn’t* it be her?”

“And that’s the problem,” my boss says, pacing around with his shoe soles clacking on the concrete floor like a drum major’s percussion. “People have dream jobs, dream partners, dream lives in this place, this ‘perfect world,’” he scoffs, and a bit of ash knocks off the cigar tip. “They don’t care if they’re under investigation for domestic terrorism, the same way they no longer have to care if the air turns black or their future burns up.” He sucks the cigar again, then shoots the entire rest of it at the non-flammable floor,

where Leo picks it up, raises it to him like a cross between a toast and permission. Braise nods. Leo begins smoking it, while Braise inhales and sits back down, yanking the chair from behind him and screeching it across the floor. “Soon, since they’re literally just *living* on the internet, they’re gonna want to throw themselves upon the very machinations that comprise our civil society, Chausser! And you should know that better than anyone coming from a big city!”

I nod, digesting his words, the gravity of what last night was sticking in my gut like the taste of stains on teeth the morning after. “Can I be brutally honest for a second?” I ask my boss.

“Shoot,” he says, beckoning Montserrat for a drag again, which he receives, after Leo brushes off the sides of the half-smoked thing.

“We’re dealing with someone who claims to hold the keys to heaven,” I say. “And in that moment, sir, what I realized is that it’s more intoxicating than the cigar you’ve got in your hand.”

“Yup,” my boss says, coughing four times as the smoke spills out of his mouth onto the table. “And the issue now is that minors are involved.”

I look at Leo, who coughs as well, twice, not from the smoke. “Excuse me?”

“Yeah,” Braise says, opening the folder again, moving my polaroids to the side, and sliding over a new intel report apparently hot off the printer this morning. I scan it, flipping through with the steadiness of someone coasting on ice, and find myself, dry mouthed and sober, saying, “A *farmhouse*?”

“Tread lightly with this guy,” Braise says. “If we’re using the analogy of an organized … belief system, as it might be, if Gerald is their version of a messiah or a savior, this guy you’re seeing today is the Judas who never turns.”

“Rural America,” Leo says, eyeing the cigar again but deciding against it. “Es una locura constantamente cuando no hay ojos para ver cosas que han ocurrido dentro puertas cierras, y también es imposible para entenderlo cuando hay ojos en el cielo y en las paredes, obviamente.”

“How’s your Spanish coming, Duncan?” My boss asks me. “If this leads where we think it’s going, you might be needing it.”

“I’m still not over the fact there are *children* on the premises,” I say, re-reading the report and hoping the paper shuffling deflects the question like Kevlar catching a regular bullet.

“We all know internet disclaimers don’t work,” Braise says. “And this is turning into something a lot nastier than just one dude with a router saying he’s God.”

“That’s the scary part,” I say, closing the file on ‘the Farmer.’ “He only claims to be like everybody else.”

“While giving people access to a utopia on a pay to play subscription.” Braise says, sighing again, then opening a container for eyeglasses and dropping the butte inside it, snapping it shut. He stands, Leo and I following suit, then he shakes hands with Leo, says something like *continue the excellent work*, and then, as Leo opens the door to leave, steps in front of me before I can follow him.

“Thanks again, Leonardo,” he says. “Agent Chausser will be with you in about 15 minutes.”

Oh no. I know what’s coming. Agent Braise looks back to my file, to me, picks it up, snaps it shut, claps me on the right hand side with it, and tells me, flat out, *it’s time to exorcise*. A shudder runs down my spine in the slightly chilled room, and my wallet seems as large as a milestone in my pocket right before I get booted into the reservoir …

###

Total darkness, except the headset, so lithe and smoothe, fitted and absolute, I don’t even know I have eyes. My body is completely floating, and I am nowhere and everywhere. The words command INHALE, and I do so, knowing disobedience would bring a shock to my system akin to tripping in a dream and never waking. SCREAM, the words command, and I do so, but hear nothing. My mouth is a vortex to a gaping void, reaching a level never seen in the presence of a him a her or a them or myself, and then it says STOP, and I do so, my chest and lungs, if that’s what they’re still called, moving rapidly like a bellow fit to burst. INHALE, it says again, and I do so. The sweat and the water mix to the point where there’s no moisture, only cold. I don’t smell anything except for cigarette smoke, and even though my brain, in some level unreachable like a staircase demolished, knows it’s not that, the smell is all that’s in my nostrils, bringing back the image of my mother in a homebound dress sitting at a back window staring into forestry she hated walking into. SCREAM, it commands, and I do so, and this time, the gray text in the black background grows like a cartoon splash screen and itself howls LOUDER, and I do, my neck muscles bulging, my heart hammering in my eardrums worse than my head against the toilet or my intestines at the table or my dick last night in the enhancer feeling like it was *her* again. It tells me to stop. I do. Then, the words say, *THINK OF WHAT YOU WANT TO LOSE OR WHAT YOU HAVE LOST*. I do, I do, I do, my numb fingertips, somewhere at my sides, still bearing that indentation that made me want to jump on her car’s hood like a lunatic before I smashed our memories to smithereens like a child playing with a broken mirror. SCREAM, it tells me again, and I do, to the point where my forehead feels like an overinflated balloon and the shaking inside the chamber makes the water around me ready to boil if it weren’t already nothing, everything, existence, and right before I feel as though I’m going to black out, when

things get wobbly, the screen displays, in pleasant green, THANK YOU FOR EXORCISING, WOULD YOU LIKE TO SIMULATE A VIOLENT SCENARIO? NO, is the command from above, and as I close my eyes and try to get them to stop pounding on the lids in time with my kickdrum heart, there are two sliding clicks, and the light returns …

###

In the locker room sauna, my head in my hands, the steam around me like a blanket, the exhaustion seeps into me like regret's gentle taunting. *Animals*. I rub my temples. *We are just fucking animals*. My locker's got a picture of the virgin Mary in it, a memento my mother left me, and the only thing playing in my head aside from the balm of the steam, gentle now, is how we marry our parents, or something like that … and she didn't *really* look like Bella, *did* she? There was no birthmark under her chin on the left hand side, her hips didn't move the same way on top of me, like a partner dancing the same technical precision without the flourishes of a known duo. And most of all, the doll I'd bought with my first paycheck from our Division, as realistic as 'she' or 'it' is, for those not used to our advancements, did nothing compared to the simulated way Gerald managed to capture *something* like her voice, but she didn't quiver the way Bella used to, didn't make me moan like she did, didn't do those small, intricate things in a way that made her saying *I love you* strike me as anything but the knockoff brand for a top-line loss that replicated the original enough to make me forget I lost it. Now, however, about to venture back into the expanse Gerald's saving 'us' from, the draped towel over my head and the weakness of my muscles, my bones on this bench make me feel the remorse of someone who went for something that reminds them just enough of what they lost to make me feel the difference …

Fuck. I have to *work* today, too … and the part that makes me most ashamed, as I walk my tired, towel-wrapped corpse in motion over to my locker, is part of me says I'd never do it again, and part of me has been around enough to know better.

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Driving through the fraying, frost dusted crop stalks, I remember what my therapist, prior to my move to the country, said to me about divorcing Bella: *you're living like society after Christ,* he'd told me, *either following in her footsteps, in your mind, or reacting to the absence of her*. And that's really what the biggest difference is between living in the city and living in the countryside. In the city, the idea of absence is desolate shops, empty subways, bus stations outfitted with benches designed so that no human can sleep on them. In the country, meanwhile, absence is a part of daily life, where the same birdsong that gets mixed up with exhaust hums and fumes and traffic horns echoes through a pasture effortlessly, as if it

were the wind itself. Same thing goes for people, I suppose. In the city, doing this same job, it was full-on facsimiles of bars and clubs and nights out, where the people moved like chess pieces in blitz games in and out of one another's lives aside from those who grabbed a foothold in places where everybody's *going* somewhere. Absence in the country is only *true* when *nobody* is there to know the difference. This part of Pennsylvania, which, thanks to my all-time shit luck, is the kind of place in Maryland where Bella's from, with the American pastoral and all that cliché bullshit, doesn't take to losing people well, and we're halfway down the country highway rolling past wineries, flower stalls, pie stands, and three horse and buggies outfitted with plastic lights before Montserrat has the guts to ask me if its okay for him to smoke in my car after *that* shit.

"Of course it is," I tell him, my chest sore, my heart with its wings folded like a bluejay in the frost. "Listen, Leo, you've had enough time to understand American women are unique.'

"Es verdad," he says, unwrapping the cigarillo and stuffing the plastic in a button-clipped pocket of his leather jacket. "Do you want to … *talk* about it?"

"What's there to talk about?" I ask him, flicking on my right turn signal and allowing the radio to keep humming Dua Lipa on near mute.

"It seems … *deeper* today," Leo says, lighting up a bit of the *marihashish* I don't know he's smoking, officially, and blowing the covert plume out the passenger window. "There's a saying I came up with about American women and their cars," he waits, allowing me to coast the turn before delivering. "They all smell like *exhaust*."

"My ex-wife didn't smell like car exhaust," I tell him, snorting once. "She smelled like a man who she said was a friend and who I trusted would have stayed that way, if you must know."

"Ohhhhhhh," Leo says, nearly choking on the blunt. "I'm sorry that I asked."

"Don't be sorry, you had to sit there and watch Braise essentially view me like a porn movie in order to make sure I didn't compromise national security when I came into my own hand last night." This gets a rare, echoing laugh from Leo, who offers me the end of the blunt. I'm tempted, especially since the ashes of it have drifted a bit in the window due to Leo's last smoke kiss being a bit of a misfire, but I decide not to tempt fate. Yet.

"So, what did you do in return?"

"Drank myself into this vehicle we're sitting now," I say, tapping the GPS, the route to Faber's Farm a 12 minute aqueduct on Google maps, a tributary to ancient, simpler times. "Plus I've noticed, being on assignment in the countryside, that it's easier for memories to trap someone if they stop moving. Could you *imagine* not having a car out here?"

He shakes his head.

“And what part of Spain did you say you were from?”

He turns to me, his brown eyes glazing, before reaching into his inside pocket and producing the slickest pair of Ray Bands this side of the Atlantic, light blue and cool silver arms going over his roadmapped eyes. “Yo naci en Barcelona en el ano mil novociento noventa y cuatro, pero directamente después, mi familia y yo fuimos a Madrid, y en mi cabeza, pienso que soy Madrileno en realidad.” The automatic translater in my head is working decently well, today, but I do know there’s going to come a time, on this assignment, where English isn’t going to save me and I won’t have time for the earpiece to sing the language back to me.

“Is Spain a rural country?”

“Claro,” Montserrat continues, resting his arm on the dash and deciding to peak at his own phone to view the file on Farmer Faber. “Hay muchos pueblos donde personas siguen viviendo como los anos anteriores, con bodegas y casas pequeñas y ermitas rurales con el sol brillante, y también hay ciudades como Madrid que tienen personas que muevan constantemente.” He doesn’t quite reek of weed, but I recommended he apply some of the bottled Ralph Lauren cologne I keep in the center console. He squirts it, sniffs it, exhales, coughs again, then says, “Que tonta, su esposa anterior, to fuck over a man who smells *this* royal!”

“Well, I wasn’t exactly a saint, either,” I tell him. “I fucked her sister afterwards.”

“Mentirosa,” Montserrat says, before looking at me over his shades. “Which one was better?”

“It wasn’t about that,” I say, as we’re approaching the gate to the farm compound. “And it wasn’t about sending a message, either. Have you ever, Leo, been in a place in your life when you’ve wanted to burn the *entire* thing down, where you feel like the last of the person you were is only a stain to your future existence?”

He shrugs. “Estoy aqui,” he says. “Did you *really* fuck her sister?”

“No,” I tell him. “But last night it felt like it.” We roll the car directly up the short gravel path into the enclave as I swallow a burp, the kind that feels strange in the throat, and before I know it, I’m reaching out the window and pressing on an oldstyle intercom to buzz the attention of Farmer Tom Faber. It buzzes once, and I ask Montserrat to check my collar, where he notices there’s some sorta dirt stain. “Shit, I thought I washed this,” I say. “Do you have the Clorox thing?”

“El que?” he asks me.

“The Clorox on-the-go cleaner.”

“You’re speaking German,” he tells me.

“Nevermind,” I tell him. “It’s a farm, the dude shouldn’t care.” I buzz the intercom again, running through Agent Braise’s appraisal of the guy’s movements in my head and knowing, with certainty, the dude’s not supposed to have moved off the property before 4:00pm today with his rest schedule. It’s the lord’s day, after all, and the guy’s not a churchgoer, nor is he the type of person to host enclaves of his friend and family here in the name of the lord. No, by the time, after an awkward silence, I’m pounding my thumb into the intercom three more times to get the guy’s attention, I’ve resigned myself to the fact what I did last night has cursed the living hell out of me, and my newfound conclusions are affirmed when Montsterrat taps me on the shoulder and says, “the gate is open.”

Naturally, he’s right, meaning that what we’re about to experience involves me getting out of the car, shuffling my boots through the slightly iced gravel, opening the metal gate, and praying, in the silent way I do to a universe without a name, that the guy isn’t jacked up on old-school drugs or garage filler with a shotgun ready to blow us away after Gerry tipped him off. However, Braise, who asks us, as well, why the hell he can’t leave us alone for longer than four hours without needing Air Support, tells us the last time he was seen was not in the 20s style dustbowl imported farmhouse painted the colors of the nation’s stars and stripes, but rather in the massive, horizon filling barn with the loft that’s about a quarter mile down the property. With the local authorities probably watching along on their own rudimentary, last century spyware anyone could buy for six dollars over the internet at this point, we decide to press our luck after a series of three coinflips: if the guy’s truly in the barn and his animals are not, as the case may appear to be, I, having accepted my fate in the countryside, will be the person to act as a liaison for the same Government he and his friends and their enclave are looking to detach from, and will position myself, bulletproof vestless and all, as an emissary for logic and common sense while Monsterrat, high off his ass, takes pictures and video of the entire thing for evidentiary reasons from the passenger seat of my car. Because of course. However, before we embark on this journey to whatever world exists inside that massive structure – thing is as huge as an airplane hanger, and there’s a sickly sweet, slowly drifting scent emanating from the cracked-open doorway – I’m finding myself asking Montserrat if there’s any blunt left. He tells me, of course, that he chucked it out the window about four miles down the road, and I can’t help but have a flash of my former wife’s face telling me, before I went and talked to pool players and hard drinkers and street smokers in the city trying to protect us from ourselves, and all, in my savior schtick Braise told me is marketing bullshit, to *protect myself* and *have a good day*. Pro-tip: it’s a lot easier to do that when it’s for someone else, in my opinion, than just for the fact dying here would make a

mess for a bunch of people to clean up in a way I wouldn't even know was *missing* something.

I flip my hand to Montserrat, get out of the vehicle with my weapon still holstered, and then gag so hard my Adam's apple feels like it just teed off. Something is *dead* inside that barn, and there's a burning, grill, not quite barbecue but more backyard blazing smoke smell in the air mixing with the rest of it. I place my hand on the splintered door ready to dive down to my right and use it as a shield, but the orange flicker from inside and the resistance the door gives when I push on it to open it, like its stuck in matted hay plastered to the ground, makes me feel like there's been a glitch in the plan even Farmer Faber or Gerald himself didn't plan. Upon finally wrenching the thing open and making my arms feel like I deadlifted for the first time in 20 years, the sight before me immediately makes me worry I'm still strapped in the sensory deprivation tank, but my gut does a sumersault and I drop halfway to the ground and keep my cold, shaking hand right in front of me, as if that will protect my eyes and brain and heart and soul from the fact there's *two* people in this barn: one of them is the tattered remnants, overalls and flannel half eaten, of Farmer Tom, his work boots and his blue jeans and what used to be his skull all being crawled over by what, from this distance, are clearly white and brown and matted maroon blood drenched *guinea pigs*, who have eaten the guy's ribcage cleaner than a starving artist at an Outback Steakhouse rib competition, and the guy opposite him, with a bag over his head and his arms tied behind him by rope the thickness and length of which could hog tie an elephant, hears my swallowed gasp and screams in a muted voice two syllables, *MMM MMM MMM MMM MMM MMM*, a book in the hay at his feet propped open on its thick spine and the guinea pigs having not overtaken him as of yet due to him still breathing, beating the legs of the chair to which he's tied with the backs of hits boots and shouting *MMMMMMMMMMMMM* as one of the guinea pigs brushes its side against his bound, gagged, prisoner form.

Montserrat rushes from the car next to me, and upon seeing the grisly visage, he and I draw our weapons and make our way inside. However, before we do, as if a flock of birds betwixt the wind and ready to sail south for a winter that never ends, the guinea pigs crawling over the farmer's gorged body connect on a wavelength *way* beyond our comprehension. "*I am too high for this*," Montserrat says, clicking his safety off and pointing it at the guinea pig serpentine, moving to us in a demented conga line like *Beetlejuice* met *Stuart Little* in an episode of *Saw*. However, before we both dumbstruck lesser mortals and unload lead into the rodent freaks, they slither-dance away from us, rope up, feet on shoulder, up the leg of the screaming survivor who could've been waterboarded with the farmer's

blood for all we know, and then the first one, almost like a small monkey who learned how to use its claws as thumbs, unties the mask around the guys neck. It falls, and the MMMMMMs turn into him screaming SATAN, SATAN, SATAN, SATAN, SATAN in a way that makes us nearly want to cap him to put him out of his misery. They gag him again, and that's when it's clear, through the voice encoder they've jacked from what must've been Farmer Tom's headset, they want to *communicate* with us.

"Duncan Chausser to Braise, there's been a *major* malfunction here," I say. "Animal nanobot technology is malfunctioning, I repeat, implantations to animals are malfunctioning."

"This can't make the news," Braise tells us through our earpieces. "Figure out what they want and figure out what they've done."

I turn to Montserrat, but before we can even exchange a word, the leader of them, the one who untied the re-gagged man, calls to us in a chittering squeak and points at the farmer's lacerated body.

"No more masters!" The encoder next to them says. "Hail the great awakening!"

Monsterrat laughs a laugh with no joy which echoes through the barn, places both hands on his head, and then steps back outside in a way that makes me follow him, kicking the door shut behind me, pretending that what I just heard is a bad trip when knowing something has been broken, similar to when we crossed the threshold in a way that makes today possible since deers, cows, horses, pigs, dogs, and vultures, some of them, are now participants in a world we're supposed to rule until someone flips the switch and shows us things are meant to *fuck up* …

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"Can you describe, in your words, *exactly* what you saw?" The officer, squad commander Cecilia K. Squires, says, the recorder pressed directly under my chin, still wet with a combination of tears, bile, and sweat.

"Like I said, they moved in-in-in a-a, *serpentine* motion," I tell her, using my hand like a skater making a figure eight.

"And was that before or after they declared the death of Western civilization?"

"Before," I tell her. "One thousand percent. It was as if they were animated by invisible wires and taught choreography." The loose gravel underneath me seems like a hundred tiny boulders underneath my shaking dress shoes. Montserrat is currently sitting on a boulder that says *WELCOME TO THE FARMY* in spray paint underneath it, and if my Spanish is correct, he's arguing about the constitutionality of a piss test under the current circumstances while continuing to chainsmoke the menthol cigarettes he keeps in his breast pocket, inside his jacket. The ambulance, the cop cares, the fire trucks, the caution tape, Farmer Faber's body looking

like a cow butchered for an icebox shipment on the stretcher as the barn itself is a gaping wound of wood and pasture smells … the entire scene has me literally grinding my heel, already raw, against the back of my leathers to make sure we haven't gotten metaversally abducted.

"And you two are here under the powers of Act 1321?" She says. "Your identification has already been sent to the State database and came back verified."

"Yes, yes, we are currently investigating the actions of one Gerald Lieber and he is a known business associate of the deceased." I can't get the echoing hums of *no more masters!* from the neuropathological rodents out of my ears, but the sound gets pushed to the back burner of my brain when the caution tape is ducked under by a group of five men, Braise at the front, who, with his badge shining and gun clearly holstered, suit jacket traded for a field leather branded with our crosshair and checkmark and with the agents around him packing more official heat than the secret service at a summer barbecue with their pinpoint shades, shiny shoes, comes beelining for Montserrat and I with a fire in his eyes unseen on these shores since Liberace.

"What the *fuck*," Braise shouts, first at the lead cop interrogating me and then at the Spanish language group of two who have Montserrat on the rock, who is already holding the piss vial that they gave him like a plastic toy better meant for a dog. "Who the hell gave you the authority to question *my* agents?"

"This isn't your county, numbnuts," one of the male cops says, an older, tanned skin man in his 30s. "And you better give us some identification before you come blasting onto *our* crime scene."

"*Your* crime scene?" Braise shouts, his badge already extended with the Commander's insignia flaring, the same one he must've shown to the perimeter guards like a fast-pass to Disneyland Hell. "I don't know exactly what the hell happens in counties where the population density is less than the collective brain cells of the investigatory divisions, but my agents were on a case that's flew so low on your radar it collided with the liberty bell."

"Excuse me, sir," Cecilia says, with her gloved palm outstretched, fingernails glinting under the cold morning sun. "You are not to impede the local and state rights of our operatory procedures."

"The internet doesn't just exist in rural Pennsylvania," Braise says, a wicked, depthless laugh escaping his lips, shooting a glance at me and my ruined state like a father rescuing his kid from teachers who were beating him. "And you can keep the horror scene, I want the *witness!*"

"Bull*shit*," The male cop says. "I don't give a damn *who* appointed you, Johnny suit boy, but we're investigating occult activity involving a murder by animals with chips implanted in their brains."

“How do you know its *occult*?” Braise hisses back, the chain around his badge rattling like a steel whip. “How do you know those two didn’t smoke a pound of crystal meth and their neuroadvanced animals didn’t put them out of their misery when they smoked enough to meet God?”

“We don’t know anything for certain, except one of your agents appears to be intoxicated,” Cecilia says, gesturing to Monsterrat.

“Pfffffft,” Braise says. “Esos chingados de mierda piensan que dano psicológico es drogas.”

“Vete fuera, señor,” the one cop answers back. “Ese hombre no tiene sentido, los ojos son rojos y hay un olor de un puro.”

“Lo uniqa cosa que es puro aquí ahora es la idea que hay un dio en el cielo después de que ha ocurrido en el noche anterior, obviamente, y es una idea de un niño que piensa que la posibilidad de una droga es peor de un hombre los guinea pigs que han consumido en total.” Braise crosses the distance between the cops and himself, rips the piss test from Montserrat’s hand, spikes it on the ground with a crack, and then beelines for the barn, with the cops trying to grab him deflected by the very credentialed, extremely calm, quite pissed agents. “We are getting him the fuck out of here before the press shows up, for reasons related to national security!” Braise calls back, as there’s now an arm wrestling competition between the boys in blue and the men in dark black, settled by the agents explaining federal jurisdiction. Braise beckons to Montserrat and I, and the captain begrudgingly (after getting a wire from wherever her base is about how much of a career asshole Braise has been to barge into a scene like this and take immediate control) allows both Montserrat and I to pass back into the crime scene, where the survivor of the ritual, still clutching the leatherbound book to his right side, is being treated by paramedics who are having a day that’ll make them question *all* their life choices. Standing in the doorway, silhouetted by the sun behind us, even Braise hangs in the doorway like an intrusive thought into a broken mind beyond those maroon doors, Montserrat, with his hands in his jacket pockets, and myself, panting from the image of the pigs going back and forth and back and forth, staring at the poor guy flinching at every attempt to clear the slice wounds from the guinea pig claws over his arms by the younger paramedic team.

“You’re on strike two,” Braise tells me, still facing forward, hands on his hips.

“What?” I ask him.

“There’s a goddamn *crowd* by the gate down there. Neighbors must’ve saw you pulled in. Cop cars, ambulances, firetrucks, eyeballs.” He says. “You’ll help handle the interrogation today when we get this poor bastard out of here, and then you’re on a week’s mandatory break, Chausser.”

“Lo siento, amigo,” Montserrat says. “La culpa es mio también.”

“Si, pero es el primero para usted,” Braise says. “There’s only so much bullshittery we can deal with before the word gets out that this is happening.”

“But, sir,” I tell him. “That’s why I’ve been all over the place, what exactly *is* happening?”

“The darkest shit I think we’ve ever seen,” Braise says. “But it’s moments like these that either make a man, break a man, or cause him to be revealed as just another sack of meat like our poor lacerated fellow homosapien over there.” He nods. “Get him out the back door.”

###

I return to an apartment where nothing but emptiness, alcohol, all the channels offered by man, and the entire compendium of human knowledge known as the internet in a virtual form awaits me. The interrogation was absolutely like pulling teeth for three hours, with the guy so shook up that he had be sent to medical immediately afterwards after shaking in his skin and refusing to say anything except how the guinea pigs ferally tearing Farmer Faber’s ribcage into charcuterie was the sound he listened to for around six hours sitting in the chair and how *only the devil could’ve done these things*. Unfortunately for him, there was no sulfur in the room, only the manipulated programming of a bunch of rodents who were set to the *kill* function immediately after their serpentine dance. I pull a glass from my sparse cabinet plus a couple of frozen, dark cubes from my freezer unit, uncorking the whiskey, knowing this next week will give me time enough to be the completely useless piece of shit that I am, and pour before even putting the chilled shit in the glass. The neighbors above me are a married couple who met at Lehigh University, according to the Mister, who are currently doing the life-ladder of saving enough to be able to afford a down payment, and the neighbor adjacent, since I’ve got myself the premium window position in the building, is so attached to the Sexbot he programmed to look like his ex-flame you can hear it and him knocking the night away right on that line – aka the thin, molding walls – between personal and private to the point I need to wear headphones. And then comes the problem of the fact that whatever happens in those realms, to an extent, is the same thing that would occur if I were to have a fantasy in my own mind of my wife still loving me, since we lived in a duplex exactly like the one I can imagine the two kids upstairs wanting to put a down payment on before, as it seems to do, everything went to utter shit. I take another swig, with Montserrat already inviting me over after hours and saying we don’t get paid nearly enough to investigate the level of shit we’ve uncovered, which Mr. Lieber may or may not have a connection to. But the

question that ping pongs in my head after around half a hour, like the artificial ice now clacking in the mostly empty glass like two swimmers adrift without life preservers looking for a rowboat is this: according to the books I've read, games I've played, movies I've watched, humanity does *this* all the time. The blood flushes to my neck as I take the bottle with me and wander to my bedroom, with a bed that isn't quite rickety and posters of Paranature's leading men and ladies on the wall like a teenager since at least they cover the plaster ridges. It's no *wonder*, I tell myself, with my work shit disengaged, that there's a four billion dollar industry, lowball, behind where I'm about to go. Trying to enforce anything about it is like trying to rope in a bonfire using nothing but fire hoses and gasoline. People *want* to be somewhere else ever since they were given the chance to *read*. People *have* the kinds of desires that got me demerited by that quasi-Stasi fucker Braise, who gets paid six figures to wander into other people's territories, homes, dreams, to steal their memories, their ideas, their fantasies and make *judgments* about them. By the time the goggles are over my eyes, wires on my arms, headset over my ears and eyes, I'm seething so much I can practically feel the blood in my temples pulsing to the beat of getting thrown out of Philly and cast into this abyss where fucking disgustingly dark shit happens on the daily, and that's when the splash screen for OUR PERFECT WORLD! greets me with the prompt to enter my name. I pull up the terms and conditions to the point they fill my whole screen, and I notice, even though it isn't bolded, the terms talking about PERSONAL PRIVACY AND ANONYMINITY WITH DATA PROTECTION like they're being branded into my eyeballs. Could Braise subpoena that information? Walking the line between amorality and criminality in a world designed by Gerald Lieber would be accomplishable by an agent of the United States who is so dedicated, wholly, to his job, even on his mandatory vacation, he wanted to prove himself and protect his country by engaging fully with those suspected of separating from the idea of our perfect union.

This is what I tell myself as I log in, only to find myself in the same crystal, sapphire, and opal colored bedroom, bedazzled in the walls and with mirrors on the ceiling, where, for the price of five dollars, I paid to make love to a version of my wife so close to perfect I almost couldn't look at myself in the mirror afterwords. Only this time, the door to our private chamber is open, and as I close my throbbing eyelids, I can smell the lilac perfume she wore amidst some kind of distant, echoing singing outside, from the darkness wherein I have not yet ventured but into which, guided by my core self, I have no reason not to follow …

I was expecting Farmer Faber's funeral to be sad, but according to the Perfect World app, I've shown up just in time for his *ascension*. I didn't really try to hide who I am: I put on a bowler cap, shoes shinier than the credit card I used to pay for *advanced access*, and I chose my smells to be a mix of cigar musk, iced whisky on my goatee, and cologne that would bankrupt me irl. My tie's black, but as I'm waiting to load into the scene in the room they design for this, which reminds me of the leatherbacked, Lysol smelling antechambers for high class massage parlors with endings happier than this one, my hands are shaking to the point the controller's sliding around in my palms and breaking part of my experience. I don't *do funerals well*. My family, ironically, sucks at dying, with my father and the stroke that left him on the meat market floor deader than carrion being unable to be iced over by the priest's words back when I was a teenager, but hopefully by the time BellaBot gets here (since I'm receiving a *personal guide and greeter*) I'll be able to sustain an erection long enough to pass my admittance into the revival service, or whatever. However, the being which opens the door from the antechamber into the main server is a woman or AI or some combination of *why's it matter*, yet it's definitely not Bella: this being has hair blonder than a German pilsner, shoes sharper than ice picks, and eyes bluer and colder than the mountain she'd be scaling in those absurd heels. I stand at attention as she peaks around the doorway, her black dress fitting close enough to her body to resemble a gymnast's latex, practically, and I suddenly get the feeling my white shirt, dark jacket, and flat topped shiners are *too* respectable for getting this close to death in this place.

"Brother Duncan!" She says, something like a German accent tracing how she pronounces the u. "So glad you could make it, my name is Ada!" I shake her hand, formally, respectfully, part of me screaming in reverence for the man who got eaten alive to stay down and the other part of me blown away by her presence.

"Hi there," I cough twice, "Ada!"

"You're nervous!" she says, smiling at me with perfect moonlit sand shining teeth. "Gerald told me it's your first time!"

"It's my first metaversal funeral, that's correct," I tell her.

"Un hunh unh!" She says, wagging a teal painted fingernail in front of my face. "*Funeral* is not in the perfect world dictionary." Her intonation strikes me as familiar, from somewhere, but her scolding of me makes my face red like she slapped it.

"I have so many questions," I tell her, my collar burning. "What exactly should I call it?"

“Nobody dies here,” she says, rolling her eyes and planting one of her garter free heels directly in the center of my two shoes. “Yes, Farmer Faber’s ribcage was consumed by rodents, but in *Our* Perfect World, this is something to be …” she searches for the word. “*Celebrated!*”

“A celebration of life,” I tell her, her eyes less cold and more Caribbean level water this close to me. *Is the point of that to fuck as much as possible?*

“Yes,” she says. “I can tell you’re already excited to partake in the festivities, but I need to check you first.” She puts her hands palm up and open to me, smelling like lotion. “Do you consent?”

“To?”

“A search.”

“For what?”

“Wireware,” she says. “Gerald is extremely happy to receive you this evening, considering we love our law enforcement and responsible officials here, but you also understand this is an invitation only, privately protected service, do you not?”

“I do,” I tell her, opening my arms underneath my suit jacket and sniffing the air to make sure I haven’t started sweating straight through my deodorant. “Search away, Ada!” I tell her, consenting for my device to be scanned. Luckily for me, I don’t have to lie about this: being off the squad for a week to recover from having my former wife, whom I thought I was encountering tonight, reincarnate in front of me in a pay to play, perfect form a-la a dude teenager’s wet dream and not being able to say no to it has me feeling somewhat destructive, yet when she rubs her hands slowly up my shirt, around my collar, even between my legs – necessarily? – I can’t help but be struck by the turquoise scented perfume, which my scanner says is *Armani*, and the way her hands linger before she takes them back. *Where the hell am I?*

“Good,” she says. “An honest law man, now I’ve seen it all!” She says, extending her braceleted arm out towards me. “Join us, Duncan!” I take her hand as if entranced, and when we load into the main room, I feel like I’m floating down a river …

###

Instead of cries and moans, bodies shaking in grief, we enter into a stadium-like atmosphere playing classic rock and brother country style guitars. People are drinking moonshine straight from taps with Farmer Faber’s face on it, as though the clear liquid is gasoline level liquor straight from his mouth like a fountain. People of all ages – Christ, there are KIDS here???? – are playing Old McDonald style games, but instead, it’s Faber’s Dodge-Ums in a go-kart style, the exhaust backfiring mixing with the shooting range, BroadSide Barns, set up on the nosebleeds, where the

farmer's rifle collection is being honored by how much metal can be discharged with the swipe of a card paying for unlimited ammunition for the next hour. Literally, the guys up there (and women, too, in this year of our lord, go figure!) are making *bullet art tributes* to the man, where his farm and his face are being patterned like the ballistic version of spot water color connect the dot paintings. Meanwhile, the main stage, where there's a podium ready for a speaker bedecked with the bronze and gold insignia of the Perfect World app, is filled with Faber's immediate family: he's got no widow, but his two adult children are apparently, according to Ada, regailing people with stories of how the man hated his mortal existence. "Of all our family," Ada tells me, pulling me to a more traditional bar where Chris Stapleton's "White Horses" is blaring on the speakers around us like the deep end of a swimming pool. "He was the one who was *most* ready to go."

My God. Part of me wants to find a way to disconnect and dial Leo; we never even *considered* suicide as of yet. However, before I can, Ada is smiling that modelesque, dimpled smile and bumps my hip with her lower section, which I couldn't help but noticing as she led me here is literally almost comically perfect. The glass of whiskey which she gives me, adding to the one I was sipping in the waiting room and matching with the receptors enough to make me feel like I have superpowers, you know, isn't going to help with this, and she tells me that since I decided to take the leap and pay to attend this service, there's a free overnight stay option where, so long as I'm willing to sleep in my virtual mask, I can revel with these people who I'm supposed to hate for their resistance to the mortal world until the cows being used for ritualistc sacrifices in Farmer Faber's honor come home. Before I can do that, however, I look over her shoulder, tattooed with some kind of flower, a chrysanthemum, I think it's called, and her golden loop, tightly pierced earrings at the other couple walking up to the high top bar. My heart nearly falls through my chest, because that, taller than Ana and in a red dress versus black more ready for a Gatsby party than Faber's not-funeral, attached to the debonair, navy blue suit of Gerald Lieber himself, is my literal, actual ex-wife.

"Duncan!" Gerald shouts, raising his glass to me. "So glad you could make it, brother! I see you and Ada are getting along excellently." The bartender, a guy in his mid 20s in a perfect maroon button down vest, bows to him, as the crowd around us engaging in high top ordeourves notices the speaker of the millennium and his new trophy on his arm making his way to me. My heart leaps into my throat like a gag order, and Ada next to me now feels like just another body compared to the animatron making eye contact with me without blinking in a way that used to scream *love*.

“What’s the matter?” Gerald asks, literally grabbing my ex-wife’s projected ass with his hand and squeezing to maker her flinch. “Were the access tickets too high for your Government budget?”

“I’m on personal time, Mr. Lieber,” I tell him. “And I must say, Ada’s explanation of exactly what we’re doing here enticed me even further.”

“Put it on the platinum credit!” He tells me, raising his glass and waiting. I grab mine and clink it with the anxious whip of someone who missed a dance step correcting themselves, and he says, “To Gerry Faber’s transcendence from the fallen world to ours, forevermore.” He drains his high ball, filled with some sort of concoction, and before I can strike the image of the last time I saw my wife, her eyes filled with tears, her bags filled with her life, making her way out of that door in a countryside I won’t drive through, now, he drags Bella-Bot to the stage through a crowd of people calling *lord* and *sir* and *thank you, thank you, bless you!*

Ada intercepts my eyes by planting her ridiculous ass directly on the bar stool in front of me, yet right now, with how my heart is rotating in my chest like a broken clock trying to turn, enough that it hurts, I can barely meet her eyes or respond when she drapes one of her calves across my own.

“What is it, Duncan?” She asks me, checking the straps of her black dress, brushing some particles off her tattoo. “Am I not hot enough for you?”

“It’s not that, that’s … that’s not why I’m here,” I say.

“But,” she stutters, like a line of code hitting an error. “In the terms and conditions, you agreed you were here to be *free*.” She withdraws her leg from mine and crosses her arms, tilting her head, as the bartender cleans glasses and looks at me with eyebrows squinted with an envy I don’t even *want*.

“Is Bella …” I ask her.

“Who?” she asks.

I sigh, muttering something about being *extremely confused*, and she pats my shoulder like a friend versus someone programmed to fuck me. “Don’t worry, Duncan,” she says. “After the consummation you’ll feel better.”

“The … the *what?*” I ask, and then, over the microphone and in a way that silences even the automatic gunshots echoing from the bullet art range, Gerald Lieber, in his majesty and in his kingdom where everyone agreed, legally, for him to be a demigod, stands at the microphone in expectant, buzzing charm.

“Ladies, gentlemen, automatons who have surpassed us all,” he says. “We are here today, in short order, to celebrate the ascension of one Farmer Faber.” Everyone cheers, raising their glasses, and I straighten myself on my barstool while Ada keeps her hand coiled in mine. She strokes my palm

three times with her finger, and my brain, heart, and lower body are having a three way argument the whisky might be winning.

"I won't bore you, we all know why we're here," he says. I *swear* he's looking right at me and Ada. "But for those new to Our Perfect World, this is a place where the words *funeral* and *death*, and the phrase *passing away* are outlawed, as you know, under punishment of time in our Hell." He says, the crowd a quieted hush. I keep Ada's hand in mine, but collide my knees with the bottom part of the bar and place my hand on my chin. "As we all know, the reason we are here is that the world outside has absolutely, utterly fallen."

Heads nod, glasses clink again, a couple celebratory gunshots from the nosebleeds in agreement.

"In his life, Farmer Faber was a man who sacrificed fifty seven of his sixty three years on this planet to be a machine for this country." Gerald adjusts the microphone, as the screen turns into a retrospective of Farmer Faber on a tractor, Farmer Faber with his head bowed around a country dinner table with a wife who's dead and kids who are grown on stage back when they were in their little overalls and hand-sewn dresses, probably eating latticed apple pie with no sense of cliché. "He woke early in the morning, slaved over crops that were consumed by people who thought steak and venison and cabbage and corn grew on the shelves at the grocery store. He drank moonshine which he and his wife made in the shack in his backyard on the house part of his property, and by the time he was in his 40s, even though his bones were destroyed and ligaments worn out like belts across an engine being stripped, he was given pills to make him feel less and do more and drinks to do the same." Gerald clears his throat, the closest thing to genuine, *human* emotion, if that's a phrase anymore, I've seen from him so far in those lacquered coughs. "As he got older, and we met online, I encountered a man who's brilliance in terms of his truths of life – how to love, how to raise things, care for things, give one's soul, mind, and body to something larger than himself – was caught in a loop of working, living, dying, in that order." Gerald says, turning towards his family on stage. "His son, Nathan, went on to college and became an engineer who made four times what his father did in a way where his body wasn't sacrificed, and his daughter, Victoria, became a fashion consultant in a big city where, in her words, people talked shit about men like her father on a daily basis because the skyscrapers made them think they were better as they walked in their shadows because they stretched higher than the barns." The crowd murmurs, and up there, with his hand raised to stop them, I realize Gerald is less a priest, at his highest, and more of a conductor of their literal *feelings* in this place. I tap my glass subversively for a refill. "Now," Gerald says, hitting the podium with three taps. "Faber

and I came up with this idea on a drunken night of cigar, moonshine, and other things people outside of here wouldn't understand." When the bartender refills my drink, eyes turn to Ada and I, and I swear the entire place can hear the liquid sliding down the glass.

"Believe it or not, dear Family, there are indeed people who see us as some kind of dirty commune, because the idea of us being unable to live without each other, the idea of people paying to access a world that uses everything they gave us better than they do and in ways where hybrid human robots aren't shot doing their daily duties, where people who perform *as* robots aren't stripped of their muscles, their dignity, their pride, that dirty word they say's a sin, are free, they see *us* as living in *hell*." I drain the glass so fast that I behold the pollution free, moon hanging sky above me as a theater of its own just to avoid their eyes and the now-still hand in mine, but before I can even set the glass down, go *ahh*, from draining the liquid, the bartender's ready for another and Gerald's saying, "However, even those who act as robots for arms and hands and minds way above the little people gathered here today, who choose, by our union, to become larger, better than we were, are greeted here as Family so long as they, too, support our cause." Then, he claps his hands, and anyone who was seated in either the nosebleeds, the bleachers below them, on the stage, even at the bar, as Ada drags me to my feet and *accidentally* bumps into me, again, stands. "And why are we here, dear Family?"

"To live forever!" Everyone says.

"And what does Mister Faber get to do this evening?"

"To live!" They say, raising their glasses. From the speakers and the very air comes the sound of rolling drums, as though a marching band has decided to start playing their salute. Everyone claps and cheers as a lanky, older figure emerges from the back of the stage, and when the spotlights hit him, the applause turns *rapturous*. I drop my glass clean down on the bar with a couple droplets skipping over the top: out strides, with his ribs fully intact, his face beaming with his wrinkles partially erased, almost like he's an extra in a Michael Jackson video or a hologram of a reincarnated 70s salesperson, Dom Draper as a silver fox, is the *literal, actual farmer*. His kids on stage are shaking with the kind of joy that can barely be contained by hands over their faces, and Gerald embraces the Farmer, as he is now, in a hug so strong it puts what used to be *Black Mirror* right in the face of everyone, intentionally. I realize, at that moment, that not only do these people *want* to live forever, they perhaps *want* to leave a world that promised us all a whole lot and *OH MY FUCKING GOD*

I stand up so fast my stool collapses behind me, and what Ada thought was happiness before she turns around fades to shock. I could fucking *throw* the glass at the stage and hope to break his botty skull clean open for

how his tongue is halfway down *my* ex-wife's throat, and everyone is clapping as his *carnal desires are now guiltless and freely being realized* by Gerald, who has the two robots up there literally disrobing each other like we've wandered into an Amsterdam sex show in the Midwest. Right before I can blitz the stage, the world going blurry and Ada desperately trying to get me to stop, two dudes in gray suits intercept me, apologize for the *shock of our light to those who've lived in darkness*, and they beckon Ada and I away from the revelry as the same *unhs* and *ohs* which used to live rent free in my head echo behind me like the cold laugh of a bully, the universe itself a taunt for things I feel like got away from me and only getting reborn myself in the unthinking way beyond wherein I care can possibly hope to capture once again …

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No matter what she does – how she slides her utterly magazine ripped, ridiculously round ass across my khakis, when her eyes, bluer than the sky during the winter finding the sun, look up at me as she takes me in her mouth – I can't stop thinking about whether she's *real*. She tried slow, at first, taking me up the center of where Bella used to know I loved it, then, with the mechanized pressure of a room for rent in a place where this happens daily, the rush of a free trial period ending, she asked me exactly what I like, where I like it, the stupid, stammering words, in addition to the sweat coming off me from concentrating not bearing the sweet smell of successfully grabbing her hips, like I'd want to, and showing her how little I care about the festivities outside. She says I must be drunk, has a look on her face, consistently glancing towards the door, now, and says there might be something they have on hand to *make me think clearly again*. And here we are, behind the closed doors, with one of the most gorgeous women I've ever encountered in my 32 years of living, with a drink fit for a pimp or a prince in one hand and my flaccid dick in the other, her feet kicked up behind her in a way I'm ashamed to say might be the only thing getting me from home plate to first base when it comes to any of this because she said, and she meant it, that kissing is only meant for people who make it past the initiation phase, at which point I stammered something about still needing to respect the limits of my job, which *she* took to meant a different kind of job and it turned all fucked up, with the only blood in my body pulsing on my cheeks and the ring of my collarbone at how *stupid* this whole thing has gotten.

And, of course, that's when someone knocked on the door. Ada quickly allowed me to sheath the most important part of me, with no digital ability to engorge it and mean it in any physical, real way yet unlocked by the bleeding blinking of my account at the velocity of *fuck this* after seeing what

Farmer Faber's eternal reincarnation did to the copy pasted, walking imitation of my ex-wife, and then Gerald and said robot are walking into the room with Ada barely covered in a lace bra and panty set redder than my blood pressure pounding in my wrists, hands on my hips and looking at this guy's classy, thousand dollar shoes he's bought with money just like *mine* right below his spotless dress pants and his bare gut, hanging over the top of his waistline, with his crimson tie around his neck, loose, like the male version of power having just *arrived*, or something.

"Ada," Gerald says, shaking his head back and forth like he's caught a dog pissing on the carpet. "This is a *disaster*."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lieber," Ada says, folding her hands in front of her lower stomach. "He did say he's had a lot to drink."

"So what?" Gerald says, his words lagging on their own accord, actions direct and punchy. He picks up the rest of *her* hi-ball glass and drains whatever was in it, the circuits with his real life visage in that country rancher trap house waltzing past a state of him giving a *damn* if he remembers. "I take it all of this has been a lot for you, Dominic."

"Duncan," I tell him, feeling like a schoolboy about to get rulered, with my chest hairs still smelling of Ada's mouth tracing along their curled tips. "And yes, Mr. Lieber, I do apologize for taking Ada's time and not utilizing her to the fullest." There's an awkward silence as Gerald puts his hand on the woman's shoulder, massaging her with a paw that's used to getting everything it wants, but its when he reels back and prepares to *strike* her that I find myself screaming *no no no no no* and *wait!* and nearly throwing myself in front of him as the woman just stands there, her own eyes on the carpet, having not reacted at all and standing with the posture of someone who *expects it*.

Gerald, the Bella bot, and his entourage of cloaked bodyguards actually *laugh* at me like a chorus told to chuckle via cue card.

"Get a load of this guy," Gerald says, turning to his closest subordinate with that viper's grin, toothless. "He's an *artificial activist*."

"W-what?" I ask, Ada having not moved, her free right hand clutching the silver bracelet around her left as the two jangle ever so slightly, as if every movement she makes could be an eggshell step.

"They tell me you saw it for yourself at that shitty diner where I remind myself how much life sucks," Gerald says, placing his open palm on the back of the Bella bot, loosening his own tie around his own bare chest to the point it falls off his neck. He bends down, picks it up, and then wraps it around the Bella bot's thin wrists in a way that have me panting through my nostrils as he tilts her chin right up into his eyes for a hot moment. "We're the slaves in their reality, your reality, Duncan, and you're gonna tell me that I'm breaking a law by striking an *automation*? Did you go marching for

the rights of crashed cars?" His entourage chuckles like a soundtrack to a sitcom, but I tell him, "It's not about that, it's about what it represents, what it *looks* like."

"It *looks like* you're so flabbergasted at being freed from society's constraints that you can't even permit yourself to enjoy the woman that every male in this entire estuary of mine finds to be the one that makes them coming back for more and allowing me to buy bullshit like this," he says, and he yanks the Bella bot towards him. "They don't have feelings, Johnny numbnuts, and you can ask Tabitha the next time you stroll onto my property: I don't hit women when they're flesh and blood, and I don't strike hybrids, neither, but if you don't keep these computers in line, they'll do what those rodents did to poor Faber before he ascended earlier today." Like an exclamation point, he plants a sloppy, doglike lick right underneath the part of my former wife's visage's neckline, and it's at that point I stride back to the bed, plant my ass dead center of it, and angrily throw my socks on while feeling the vomit churning again.

"Oh, come on, Duncan," Gerald says, trying to sit next to me, but I hiss *no* and shoot to my feet, kicking on my dress shoes feeling like the used car version of his own.

"What you've built here is *escapism*," I tell him. "You're using other people's money to build a sense of security while the real world burns itself to ashes outside."

"And how exactly is that my fault?" He asks me, hands on his muffin top hips. "If people like you want to zero their bank accounts in order to fuck things just as realistic as the women who threw you away, if you want to live in an adult Disneyland where nobody ever dies and where men are still the masters of the robots, not the other way around, who on dead God's green earth am *I* to stop you?"

"So is she *real*, then?" I ask, pointing to Ada, whose lack of emotion is breaking my heart either because she's a woman turned into a shade or the shade of a woman turned real enough to *touch* me. "Where does the line start and end for you?"

"Where did it start and end for *them*?" He asks, shrugging his shoulders and laughing a merciless, cold sound. "Or should I say, for *you*?"

His entourage eyes me with laser suspicion, the *other* in their posture that of a pride whose king has found them open blood. "Have you checked your balance, recently?" Gerald asks me, and suddenly, my heart skips a beat like the bottom dropping out underneath an ice skater on a sunlit morning. Tabbing from the live action, I nearly choke when I see my balance hovering around $20 for the rest of the next two *weeks*, with the charge having been in addition to the paltry entry fee I paid, Gerald explains in the sped-up voice of a salesperson on a TV advertisement, for the utilization of

their full services *without the full benefits of communally benefitting following initiation*.

"And I'm not initiating a fucking crosshair checkmark agent," he tells me, as I want to scream at him for terms and conditions being so violently *legal*. "If you truly want to walk the highest path available in this fallen world of men, *compadre*, you're gonna have to go back to your shitty, two bit, druggie partner in the morning and tell him and your Nazi boss to shove it, or else this vision of Bella that made your toes curl is going to be sucking mine and Faber's wrinkled cocks for immortality and there isn't jack *shit* that you can do about it!"

"God *dammit*," I say, wanting to spike the whisky, but before I can, Ada tells me that there's no more charges for the night if I want to stay with her, as if that's going to redeem the fact I just blew the rest of my gas money, potentially, until the next paycheck on watching my wife get railed by the dead best friend of the guy I'm investigating. *If I were Braise, I would fire me*. "Isn't there a non-payment option? Don't you care about class?" *That* causes Gerald to gut laugh, and it even causes Bella bot to giggle in the way only I'm supposed to know about, my highjacked memories close to what they were, but just a bit of the tone away to know that she isn't the woman who still lives in the same zip code that I left from, with no likeness suit possible because she's clearly her but *not*.

"You want to see hell after shrinking out of heaven?" Gerald says, catching his breath, swallowing a wet hiccup right after. "It's been a while since someone chose the path adjacent to trusting God."

"I just want to know if it exists," I tell him.

"Hell exists," Gerald says, standing once again, his entourage handing him a cloak to drape over his back. "I'll make you a deal: if you're truly interested in learning more about our victory over the current culture, how's about, outside of here, you, and you alone, with no wire, no facsimile, none of that ridiculous bullshit that makes my fridge tap like Beethoven trying to find the keys, right … show up at my house, there is one thing you might be able to do for me regarding my offspring and his decisions that might give me the wherewithal to credit you for a couple thousand, here." He stands up, taking the tie from around Bella's neck, seemingly more concerned for the fact he's already flattened me worse than what I was feeling on the bed. "Think it over, talk to your partner, tomorrow night, 6:00pm, I'll be waiting for you and will even let you see what life is like behind the door!" Gerald says, leading the one bot away. He turns to Ada and blows her a kiss while his entourage whisk him away, and in the freezing absence he leaves behind when the door slams, it's me and this thing that my brain, heart, and whatever's left of my soul screams *must* be a woman, but who only exists in the burning, plastered set strapped over my

eyes, the chip implanted to make her *feel* me and let me *feel* her, and the fact they haven't made contacts yet that prevent the kinds of tears that are leaking from the sides of them because that would be *devaluing the experience*. I try to compose myself, able to successfully hide those in the brim of the mask originally purchased back when I had the funds to do so, but when I ask Ada if she, you know, *is* a woman or what she *thinks* she is, she gives me the monotone, programmed *I am whatever you want me to be for the next nine minutes and thirty five seconds* with a wink and a flip of her leg that makes me rip the shitter off and barely resist spiking it into the badly carpeted floor of my apartment, instead letting it softly drop and echo around the emptiness before I stagger downstairs, effects of the liquor hanging over in my blood from the real ones I pounded and the fake ones I paid to feel, and smoke the rest of my blue L&M shorts until my chest is finally unable to feel the tightness of being so close to a touch that made me want to breathe, but isn't quite mine any longer …

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I'm the first one at the bar where I'm meeting Leo aside from the bartender, a hybrid of Steven Seagal and a WWE body builder with blinking eyes showing him the most high faultin cocktail recipes a backwoods watering hole can provide. They keep a list of the locals banned from the establishment in plain view, and the guy judges me, for being a morning drinker, for keeping an open tab with such little alcohol content. The contingencies are this: if Leo doesn't show, I have just enough to buy three good, ice cold reminders of how screwed I am, and after waking up with hazy eyes, pounding head, and twisting stomach just enough to keep riding the roller coaster, I'm hoping to be able to blame an act of whatever God is left to dodge meeting Bubble Boy this evening. That's what he called him: Bubble Boy. *As if a transdimensional orgy featuring continuously animated persons wasn't enough*, I think, allowing the bartender to raise the volume on the Dan and Shay twanging to the point where the drums mimic the beating of my head. I drain the first one as the space western, steampunk, wood and metal doors to Steven's Saloon swing open and Montserrat enters in his black jeans, chuck taylors with the blue stars on the sides, denim jacket and southern American cowboy hat, smelling like he's just stood up from the backside of a smoker's club.

"Are we allowed to light in here?" I ask the bartender, as Montserrat surveys the scene, flexing his eyes at a photograph of John Wayne engaged in a gunfight with aliens hanging from the wall behind me like an effigy.

"Five bucks extra," the bartender says, regarding Montserrat with a curious eyebrow raise and a drift towards the barstools, the pale sunlight

casting him like a conquering cavalry head. “What’ll it be for the conquistador?” the bartender asks.

Montserrat claps me on the shoulder with a ringing *ha ha* laugh, then he flashes his on the job ID to the bartender and whips a cigarillo out of his inside pocket. “I bet you’re expecting me to order *Mezcal*,” Montserrat says, sliding the rickety barstool across the floor. “In this case, I will have red wine.”

“*Wine*?” The bartender asks, his close shaven, golden beard flaring with surprise. “What kind of bar do you think this is? Are we on a date or something?”

“I’m feeling fancy,” Montserrat says, using his high-flame pocket lighter to spark a massive smoke cloud with a suspiciously cherry scent. “And to drink, I will have water.”

“Funny,” the bartender says, tapping a glass on the counter. “What brings you two feds to this neck of the woods?”

“No somos federales,” Montserrat says, clapping the underside of the bar. “Como te llamas, senor?”

The bartender slides the water to him and then looks over at me. “You speak Spanish, *amigo*?” I cringe so hard I pull a face muscle, but Montserrat is already shaking his head and offering me a toke. “I asked you what your name was.”

“Brandon,” the bartender says. “Am I going to jail or something?”

“He’s not working,” Montserrat says, and when the smoke is halfway down my throat I realize what he’s done, nearly coughing my lungs out on the bar. *Where did he get THAT?* “I’m the one who’s working, I’m just here to support a friend.”

“You guys are the ones who run the bots and shit,” the bartender, himself with an automated set of biceps and his spectacles alongside the neurological implant, declares, picking up his bottle of Johnny Walker and pouring himself a shot in a stocky glass. “Means you can see what I’m doing from your sky cameras.”

“It’s everything, everywhere, all the time!” Montserrat says, taking the smurfed blunt back and handing it to the bartender, who refuses it. “Tienes un cenicero?” he asks, knowing the guy won’t know how to answer him. “Ashtray,” I say, and now I’m *really* soaring, wanting to punch myself in the nether regions for being unable to perform. The bartender obliges, and I take the time to point at my own glass and the new one he’s slid me, and Montserrat taps his wallet with a close of his eyes, running his other hand over his bald head with the ashes falling behind him prior to putting the burning thing in the glass tray. “How did you come to know about it?”

“It’s been all the rage since the automation wave,” Brandon says, putting his hairy, meaty arms across the sticky bartop. “Once they said

either get the chip or get the cut, it became pretty easy. I've even got a Spectacle of my own back at home, obviously, and everybody knows you gotta *police* that shit."

"Un hunh uh," Montserrat says, waving his fingers and shelving his ID, which he'd left open on the bar like a calling card. "We are *not* the police."

"Agents?"

"Somewhat," he says. "We are concerned citizens making sure the responsible individuals of the United States are not using the technology provided to them in order to overthrow the government."

"Couldn't have said it better," I say.

"Hm," the bartender says. "And what's got the two of you kicking back drafts this early on a Tuesday morning?"

"The job!" Montserrat responds, pointing a finger gun at me with his ringless right hand and firing. "This guy wasn't even supposed to be working last night and wound up leading a case!"

I nearly choke on the mouthful of beer that I've had. *Of course they know*. My coughs are wet and mixed with saliva plus the afterbirth of what came back up this morning, and Montserrat whacks me on the back four times with the force of a father from last century scolding his offspring. As I collect myself, Montserrat takes a sip of his water and sparks his wine cigarillo again before asking, as calmly as collecting change, "Do you believe in Satan, Brandon?"

"Yes I do," Brandon says, coughing twice and standing up straighter. "Why, you guys recruiting for a church or something?"

Montserrat drains the rest of the water while shaking his head. He claps it down the bar. "No," he says. "He's just about to walk through the door."

Rapid, but not hurried, footsteps sound from the same swinging doors, and in a flash, Braise, my wonderful boss, comes whipping through the door in a black leather trenchcoat, with his boots echoing across the wood, and before I can do anything his hands are around my collar and he rips me off the barstool and pins me to the bar itself. Brandon is screaming for him to stop and reaching for some kind of gun or a bat or a bottle, but Montserrat calms him down and assures him the utter ass reaming he's witnessing, with Braise shaking me against the bar and screaming WHEN DID WE TURN INTO A BABYSITTING SERVICE FOR DOMESTIC TERRORISTS is part of the protocol. I'm attempting to explain that I'm a workaholic, not an alcoholic, and I got lost on my way in this morning, but Braise is screaming something about the equivalent of a court martial and already caused my glass to shatter behind the bar, where Braise is now saying that he's going to call the locals (again) as Montserrat has slid his

credit card across the counter, probably, the one the State gave him, and is saying he's now going to order three glasses of real, actual wine for us as Braise releases my collar and plants his ass directly between Montserrat and I, who is higher than a shitbird trying to get the bartender, who is picking up the class, to understand the meaning of the phrase *verguenza* in an American context, meaning *please don't be pissed at us for breaking your shit for a long time*, basically.

"You are so *fucking* stupid," Braise curses, opening his palm. "First you assume we're the only people working the operation, *then* you agree to sit for his child, who is barely out of high school, because you think what, there's a beyond scared straight for the children of backwoods occultists?"

"Am I under investigation?" The bartender asks, emptying the glass with shaking hands.

"I'm going to put my subordinate under your establishment if you don't serve us wine as soon as possible," Braise says. I've never seen him drink, never heard him scream at exactly this volume, and he's taken his own pack of cigs from his jacket pocket, already smelling like he bathed in them, and has one lit with his palms raw from where he slammed me. Three wine glasses are planted, filled, and before they're toasted like we are, braise literally pitches his back like it's grape juice and then whacks me across the cheek with it. I stagger off the stool and pitch to the ground on all fours as Montserrat explains *I signed a waiver for this*, and braise kicks me near the same nether regions I was cursing myself as if karma listened to me for Ada. "You stupid motherfucker!" Braise shouts, taking his jacket off and draping it over the bar. "The entire investigation's now riding on some fucking city-slicker asshole who hasn't had real *pussy* since his wife sold their apartment!"

"That was a low blow!" I say, tears leaking from my eyes, but my hands raised in case he goes for the gun.

"You," Braise asks the bartender, pointing at him. "Have *you* ever had robot pussy?"

"Are you the devil?" Brandon asks.

"That's not the answer I was expecting," Braise says, showing his firearm on the side of his belt, reaching into his pocket and dropping three fifties on the bar. "This isn't a bribe, this is an accurate repayment for the property damage." He goes to kick me again, but I twist so that the tie of his boot collides with the sole of my shoe. "If you were an automation I'd blow you to shit on the floor and make sure the bullet hole stays there to remind Montserrat not to endorse this fuckery. Are you paying for him?" Braise asks my partner. Montserrat shrugs. Braise curses under his breath and drops another fifty on the bar while his lit cigarette has burnt to ashes in the tray. "I cannot fucking believe he got so hot at seeing the Farmer and

Lieber Eiffel tower his ex-wife's ROBOT, she is a ROBOT, that's NOT YOUR WIFE!" He shouts at me. "That he emptied his entire fucking bank account right into the guy's pocket and agreed to be his *babysitter!*" Braise plants himself down on the stool again, and the bartender looks like a kid who has watched his father beat up his younger brother for failing to score a touchdown. "Do you have any gasoline on you?" Braise asks the bartender.

"Why, sir?"

"I'd like to huff it." He flicks his lighter again, beckoning Montserrat for his cigarillo, but when Montserrat's eyes sorta go wide he understands why he, as the superior officer, shouldn't hit it. "I feel like I'm herding a bunch of cats with liquor problems." He takes another cigarette out, lights it, inhales, then flicks it at me on the floor, where I'm gathering my breath. "Congratulations, Dunkin Doughballs, you're back on the fucking clock." Braise nods curtly at Montserrat, picks his jacket back up, and walks out of the saloon with a spit to the old-fashioned shiner XXX whisky jug near the doorway, and Montserrat helps me to my feet while saying, "Felicidades, mi companero, I'm coming with you!"

"Why?" I ask, generally, not even about something specific.

"You need *support!*"

"Gerald said I had to go alone," I tell him.

"Right, but Gerald doesn't even know what his son's been doing and where he's been going," Monsterrat says, taking a wet towel from the bartender and blotting my forehead like he's cleaning birdshit off a precious car. "You deal with the crazy forest people, and I'll meet you where he's *been* …"

-12-

The Therapist T-6780 model is the most recent version of the automated psychologist technology our department could let walk out the door: mid 40s, chestnut beard speckled with gray hair to give youthful vigor plus the allure of older wisdom starting to creep in, programmed, holistically, to include psychological background training, vocational counseling, and, get this, *seminary*, Biblically astute training in one convenient, human-like package! I've gotten a bit of an extra bonus from Braise deposited straight into my bank account in order to compensate for the bar sequence, plus to get gas and cover up the slight bruise on my cheek so as not to spark the Psychology Division's curiosity in a way Tommy, the therapist, in his perfectly buttoned shirt and courderey pants smelling like he just came off a tent-based excursion amidst the evergreens, would find "Objectively objectionable." We've got our *positivity* soundtrack playing, with some Aldous Huxley inspired mantras of *be positive, be proactive, be positioned for success* playing to a retro techno drumbeat, and, in perfect sequence like the drum machine that birthed him, Tommy is

snap clapping along with his fleshy, Skin™ palms like the Disney Small World got blessed with Snow White's forest magic. Jesus *Christ*, the amount of scrubbing I had to do in order to get the tobacco smell out of the seat linen and to get the ash off the floor! And after I ensured he wasn't malfunctioning, by his reassurance that he exists to simply get up, go to work, go to sleep, and then return home artificially exhausted to his robot wife and two kids in the menagerie of charging shacks they've got set up outside Philly, where I picked him up this morning and managed to avoid the retrograde sadness of the life my wife and I left back there, back when people *did* those things, I was able to give him some basic details of today's project: Gerald Lieber's only son and his trophy from his divorce case, Hans Karl Lieber.

"Hans!" Tommy says, in a robotic, cheery voice that matches the a-capella robotic chorus now surfing us along through the winding, wheat-stalk-laden backroads of a season primed for frost. "This boy sounds like his family is very proud of their original heritage!"

"Careful there, Tommy gun," I tell him, with a close-shaven smile. "We all the remember the time *before* that and how *that* went for the Germans."

"I apologize," Tommy says, folding his hands over his checkerboard shirted heart with nary a creak of his joints. "I did not mean to imitate the flawed programming of my predecessors and connect every situation algorithmically to Hitler."

"I know you didn't, and we dodged that one!" I tell him. "Now, what else were you asking me?"

"About when the boy's mother was deceased."

"That's a good question: honestly, when my partner, the honorable Leo Montserrat and I, pulled up to Gerald's very real house, we were under the impression that the woman was completely dead."

"Ah, if I may make a suggestion," Automatommy says, raising a finger. "From what I understand of the information you provided regarding the Lieber family, I have calculated that their income, along with the BMW cars driven by Mr. Gerald, set them into the class category where they are able to pay for our open access immortality!"

"You may be correct, but I haven't verified that," I say, tapping my fingers on the steering wheel and wishing this thing wouldn't judge me if I were to light up a cigarette. "What do you think our best approach should be to the boy?"

"Do you know his height, weight, eye color, skin color, and athletic history?"

"I've never laid eyes on him," I say. I would be more embarrassed if it weren't the truth: nowhere in that mansion of his, and especially not in the Spectacle world of his, was there a picture from this previous life Mr. Lieber

shared with whatever his deceased ex-wife's name was and with Hans Karl. It didn't exist in the converted shack, it didn't seem to exist in the realm that now belongs to Tabitha and the bot harem, and as we're on approach up the same road where Montserrat and I ventured to discover Mr. Lieber's wonderland, TommyBot brings up a very important question:

"Did you say that the son's father was in another committed relationship?"

This is where I tag a swig of my hazelnut scented coffee, still hot enough in the thermos to be more of a presence in my mouth than a drink, and clear my throat while pulling at my own tie-laced collar with two fingers. "I would call it that, yes," I say.

"Do you know when the subject's mother was deceased?"

"Didn't you already ask me that?"

"It bears reiteration for the following psychological reason: according to the DSM-7, Parental Replacement Effect is when, following the loss of a parent for either a reason related to divorce, illness, death, or estrangement, a child of any age, especially one most recently a minor under the law, experiences depression, anxiety, aggression, or resentment towards a parent for seemingly moving on in a shorter period of time than what would be deemed rationally appropriate or acceptable from their vantage point following the absence of a major parent."

Pulling into the driveway, I glance towards the window to make sure Tabitha or one of the bots, which I'm sure Tommy's got *feelings* about, isn't scoping us out with a hunting rifle. I turn the radio off, pivot to Tommy, unbuckle my seatbelt with a click and a swish, and tell him, "Tommy, I don't know how much money the Psych Department invested into you, but if you can diagnose exactly what's going on up there," I tap my own forehead. "You'll be due for an automatic credit raise, a bigger recharge station where you spend only six hours of every day fast asleep, and a promotion to Doctoral Programming."

He makes a perfectly three second gasp and places both his palms excitedly on the sides of his face like an emoji. "Agent Chausser!" He says, eyes switching to the *glowing* function. "Are you positively sure?"

"I'll be the first to recommend it," I tell him.

"I would be authorized to perform neuropsychological testing and be able to get my Family™ a vacation to the Spectacle Wonderworld!"

"Congratulations in advance," I say, opening the door gently. "Let's get you acquainted to how Mr. Lieber does things …"

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The place smells like an artificial cleanser lavender and rose bomb exploded about five minutes before we walked in the door. He installed lights without covers that stand on poles like how torches used to illuminate

caves, and the kitchen table has been apparently reserved as humans only for the moment aside from Tommy: we've got Gerald at the head, capless for the first time I've ever seen him, and outwardly sober from any best guess, and Tabitha's prepared coffee for us that sparkles with creamer and sugar underneath the lit chandelier in the country mansion kitchen. This place has got 13 rooms, Lieber's telling us, and Tabitha's looking much less like a tryout for a rural occult dress competition and more something like a trophy wife with actual skin versus the bot army that must be hiding in the rafters, in the internet. Tommy evaluates the basis of their relationship easily: been together nearly two years, happy, stable, with Mr. Lieber's daytime job as a Community Organizer, as he's called it, in a way that makes me smirk despite the badge burning a hole in my wallet at how masterful he is at cloaking. However, it's when we move a bit backwards in our time together, with Tommy guiding us down a timeline to increase our understanding, that Lieber becomes visibly agitated. Why does he snort? Because the Tommy bot has asked him for a picture of the family, which he then instructs Tabitha to get from the basement door situated about five feet behind the table. She returns, fairly quickly, might I add, with a dusted over, old fashioned, 2004 style aquamarine background retrograde capture of Mr. Lieber, markedly younger and without the shadows around his eyes from either staring into the metaverse, along with a woman with mousy hair sprayed to stiff perfection and a boy who is *way* larger than what I was picturing in my head.

"Wow! A true classic!" Tommybot says, taking the framed picture into his hand and using one of the silken napkins to brush it off. "Is that your son, Hans?"

"Indeed it is," Gerald says, sharing a sigh and a glance with Tabitha, who looks away and as though the three of us are just walking cameras for people she doesn't understand. "How long is this going to take, if I can ask?"

"We simply need time to gather information," Tommy says.

"No, I mean before you try to get him *out* of there," Gerald says, crossing his arms. "I had this conversation with your superior the other day, Major Tom, but the whole point of this visit is for us to trade favors."

"Assuredly," Tommy says, placing the picture back on the table. "The point of any successful relationship between a governing state and the population it governs is to keep its citizenry happy, healthy, and hopeful in a way that allows them to maximize individual success and collective achievement in a fair, balanced, and transparent manner!"

"Holy *shit*," Gerald says, lowering his jaw to his chin a bit. "And I thought *my* bots were good at getting people to pay for joy!"

“Joy is an essential ingredient in the recipe of humanity!” Tommy says. “Having gotten a good look at your son, may I ask a question Agent Chausser was unable to answer?”

“Sure thing.”

“When, exactly, if you do not mind me asking, did your ex-wife pass away?”

“Three years ago, around,” Gerald says, turning to Tabitha and squinting an eyebrow. “Two and a three quarters, actually.”

“My goodness, I am sorry for your loss,” Tommy says, politely folding his/its hands. “And you said that you and Tabitha engaged in a romantic relationship only a few months afterwards, correct?”

“That’s right,” Gerald says, planting one of his boot heels into the wooden floor. “If I can ask *you* something, Doctor-”

“Ah, Mister Lieber, I hate to interrupt,” Tommy says, raising his hands in front of his chest. “I am not a doctor, I am programmed as a psychologist. I help to aid and alleviate that which ails my creators by eliminating self-judgment, such as removing the words ‘should’ and ‘ought to’ from their vocabulary akin to a doctor removing bone shards from a fracture!”

“Well *well*,” Mr. Lieber says, actually *winking* at me. “I didn’t know the current administration *employed* such free-thinking Libertarians!” He chuckles, then flicks his chin at me and goes, “So that means we should *not* wait until 5:00pm to consume alcoholic beverages?”

“I mean,” the robot says, auto-correcting. “There are certainly objective guidelines for the consumption of alcohol.”

“I’ll say this to both of you,” Gerald says, standing up and pushing his tree-pattern-engraved chair back into the table. “My son is about the most straight edged human being I have ever witnessed. As a matter of fact, there are some times I honestly can’t believe I sired him.” He opens one of the high cabinets next to the window and withdraws three glasses that are exact copies of the ones at the virtual bar where Ada roped me into embarrassment, then he reaches into the high cabinet and withdraws a bottle of Scotch. “His mother, God rest her soul, would stand here at this very window, prior to the change in our family’s fortunes, and smoke so many Marlboros the blades on the fan she would stick in the frame turned yellow from the exhalation.” The cabinets slam twice, and Gerald reaches into the freezer icebox, patterned with all sorts of symbols that I’m sure Tommy has silently absorbed and cross checked. As he does so, my phone buzzes with the notification NO MATCHES for a couple of those, looking like a cross between a triangle and a pentagram or something drawable on a wall in a horror film, yet pleasant and scrawled on papyrus yellow paper. He returns to the table, and Tommy says, in his politest voice, “Oh no, thank you, gracious Mister Lieber, but I am regulated and required not to

consume alcohol or illicit substances of any kind while performing a psychological evaluation."

"Ahhhh, the difference between should and can not," Mr. Lieber says, pouring the Scotch over the ice and passing one down the table. "Agent Braise placed a call to me the other night, Duncan, and he was quite upset about the fact that we had hit an impasse in our dialogue." He raises the glass. "To continued dialogue between persons who are each holding the best ideals of our beloved country foremost in their imaginations!"

"May I make a suggestion?" Tommy asks, picking up just the ice in the glass so it clinks. "May we toast to the memory of your departed wife?"

"You may," Gerald says, and nothing more. "Tommy toasts his glass of ice to Natale's dead memory, and I toast to the bravery of Agent Braise, Agent Montserrat, Agent Chausser, and … what version are you, again?"

"Tommy," the psychotherapist automaton says. "Version T-6780."

"I toast to your bravery to venture into that world that kid's built up there," Gerald says. "To not all ingenuity being *good* ingenuity."

"The idea of what is good and what is bad is subjective, at times, and relative to the situation, aside from moralistic judgments which have become similar to laws across the combined understanding of human knowledge and compendium of human ethics, but, in principle, I agree!" Tommy says. "To that and to Hans' dearly departed mother, Natale!"

The ice slides against the robot's chin as Gerald and I take our sips, with me probably getting a third of it down and Gerald chucking his head back and draining the entire glass, with a subdued, worried uptilted glance from Tabitha checking to make sure her 'Master' isn't harming himself past the point of whatever happens outside Tommy's scope. After that, we push in our chairs, take to our feet, and venture backwards in the house, beyond a door with wooden lattices filled with glass panels from beyond which, when the air lock is opened, a foul smell of dried sweat and accentuations better befitting a school gynmanisum drifts to us. As we wind our way down a hallway filled halfway with cardboard boxes and plastic containers, almost like a labyrinth of square memories, Gerald turns to us over his shoulder, me following him, TommyBot behind me, Tabitha at the rear closing the door, "Oh yes, I should also mention: his mother *died* in this house."

"Oh my," TommyBot says, nearly colliding with an archaic stack of magazines yellowed to thirty years ago. "How unfortunate."

"Lung cancer and cancer everywhere else," Gerald says, as we finally reach the end of the hallway, markedly colder, devoid of wall markings, to a door labeled PRIVATE PROPERTY in black block lettering. After a few seconds, Gerald, sighing with *force* this time, knocks again, a semi-apologetic glance over his shoulder as the foul concoction of smells intensifies. Then, right before he balls his fist up and slams it into the wood,

the door opens, and in the pale light of whatever lays beyond it stands a boy of 18 years old, with sleep crusted eyes and a head that's slightly misshapen at the top on the right hand side, which is the direction he turns to regard myself, Tommy, and Tabitha with a unaffected, flat expression that buzzes on my wristwatch from Tommy's instant evaluation as *potential psychomotor retardation*. Instead, however, Gerald's clapping, his hands filling the hallway with the kind of echo that true skin still produces, and he says, "Congratulations, *son*, you woke up before 4:00pm today!" The condescension is enough to make my slightly warm skin crawl, and I have the sudden urge to waylay the guy in the back of the head, but before I can make good on a reaction I'm sure Tommybot would call *natural*, a controlled impulse, the kid, who is wearing a stained white t-shirt and shorts big enough to hold his markedly overweight stomach, turns to his father, tilts his spectacled head, and says, in a voice that's strangely childish, *"Piggums!"*

"Oh my," Tommy says, turning to me. "Did we neglect to factor in the potential presence of the autism spectrum?"

"No, no, no," Gerald says, with a downward glance of his eyes towards his offspring and a disgusted wheel turn of his heel. "He had a brain injury when he was a child."

"Yeah, which you didn't classify correctly," the kid says, in a voice surprisingly as mature as his father's yet with a bite on it. "Who are these men?"

"They're the people who are going to get you out of that ridiculous contraption that you've built." Gerald points at Montserrat and I. "As I've told him, his mother died in the room around the corner, and he keeps her alive in the one he's in now."

The Tommybot is supposed to be saying something to that, but instead, it seems to be still processing, in the same way I am, that this is actually how these people *live*. "When you say kept her alive-"

"Yeah, instead of banging robot chicks all day and getting it in with the neighbor's daughter," Hans says, smirking now, and his father turns around with the most disgusted look, making a quick wag of his finger and shaking his head silently back and forth like a dog just pissed on the carpet in front of him. "Let the adults talk," he tells his son, who reminds him he's recently turned 18 and that, at his age, Mr. Lieber's mother, apparently, was folding his laundry for him while he attended university. I'm worried that these two are going to kill each other before we can even get in his room and attend to the problem to gain Lieber's favor, but thankfully, whatever *Piggums* is was only spoken once, and after knocking Tommy back from the loop this sequence threw him into, Hans Karl calmly explains that he's been using the creative tools of the Spectacle to build a world, traipsing right

along the line, with a glance at his father, to outing the fact they're doing the exact same thing in front of the TommyBot. It's at this point, of course, we get to *see* it, and Mr. Lieber steals a hug from Tabitha, who won't be accompanying us on this journey to HELL, apparently, at having to, as he puts it, "seeing Natale again in all her twisted glory."

"Yeah, you just bang your new wife in the same place she died," Hans Karl says, and before Gerald can strike him, Tommy reminds us of the need to be *polite, respectful, positive, and compassionate at all times* – for we are here to aid the family, and the family, it seems, wants to maybe help us out, considering the fact, as is standard, as Tommy pointed out, in the world we're about to enter, Mrs. Lieber's still *alive* …

-13-

The place the Germanic American has built inside his own chambers, inside his own *head*, strikes me immediately as an acid trip gone wrong: in a house that isn't this one, on the top floor, in a room that looks like it used to store things by the dust under the windowsills, dead stinkbug corpses strewn atop the heating vents planted in the carpet, the indentations on the floor from the pronged, wooden cabinet feet built to resemble lions, wolves, there's a singular bed and some raggedly torn posters of long-forgotten TV shows pinned to the thin walls. From the bed, the first person viewer allows us to inhabit the brain of what splashes across our eyes in shitty word-art poppy font BUBBLE BOY'S PERFECT PROTECTION. In front of him, there's a wooden door and a lightbulb next to it which is turned on via a thin chain, and the surreal, bulky animatronics behind this memorial contraption reveal that the entranceway, the windows to the left and to the right overlooking the asphalt shingles, are actually covered by *breathable plastic*. The room bears almost no scent except the cold one drifting from the air conditioners, *too* clean, as if this entire place's smell was absorbed while the insect corpses remained just to prove they could be *perfect* as well. Bubble Boy looks down at his stained white t-shirt and oversized shorts, and I realize we are Hans Karl looking at *himself*: he picks up his right foot, grasps himself by the ankle, and then begins to chomp on his unseemly toenails using his mouth with a surprising flexibility for a boy of his weight, biting them in the strange way the guinea pigs that consumed Farmer Faber's ribcage in the "real" world might nibble their morning sustenance, and he does it to keep them even, according to his thoughts. There's a retching sound somewhere that's not in the simulated memory, meaning Tommybot might've swallowed his own tongue, or something, but then come four patterned knocks on the wooden door, and, having to quickly move his second to largest, longer, slightly curved index toe from his mouth, Hans Karl shelves his now slightly bleeding foot underneath the sheets as a singsongy voice, with the drifting

smell of Marlboro smoke reaching our nostrils, calls out, “Good morning, Piggums, Mommy is here with your breakfast!”

“Come in!” Bubble Boy says, and from the hallway, silhouetted by the darker lights in the doorway that are presumably flicked by switches versus pulled by swings, drifts an animatronic contraption stolen from the ruins of Disney world: she’s a frail woman, Mrs. Lieber, with hair a darkening brown going towards black, spectacles over her small eyes, a hawkishly thin face and yellowed cheeks stretching into a too-beaming smile as she drifts inside the bubble, gas maskless and in a flannel shirt draped over her shoulders as though it were a robe. Her tanktop is surprisingly revealing, to the point where I raise an eyebrow at how much cleavage she’s packing in front of her own kid, and the steps of her short covered lower body are soft on the floor due to these ridiculously filthy socks she’s got on from traipsing around in the contaminated part of the abode. On a golden platter for her golden boy, off clacks the top of the lid and reveals an entire menagerie of tasty cupcakes, unwrapped and stacked together, enough for three or four boxes stuffed together, along with an entire cow’s uterus worth of milk in a jug that she’s trotting along with her, plus, as brought by the servants dressed in their German maroon and yellow tuxedos, there’s apparently a course following dessert in reverse here, as Hans Karl, diligently and at the age where his mother bringing him shit in bed when he’s not ill strikes Tommy and myself as strange, as Mr. Lieber has said *nothing* so far in the interconnected chat, begins silently scoffing down the Tastycakes as the two brown and black skinned servants stand there at attention with their platters sizzling, too.

“There we go,” Mrs. Lieber says, sitting next to her son, yes, it bears repeating, her *son*, on the bed, stroking his still curlyish hair as he scoffs the Tastycakes down while making noises of gluttonous pleasure. “Daddy and I have made sure to prepare your favorite food for the day of your first real *date!*”

“Thanks, Mom!” Hans Karl says, giving his mother a sugar coated, toothless grin. “I can’t *wait* for our practice session this afternoon!”

“Of course you can’t, my darling,” Mother says, planting a kiss on her son’s cheek and beckoning to the “help” behind her. “Severus, come over here with the boli platter, will you!” The Black servant comes walking across the floor, but when he does, he goes a bit too fast, apparently, and ends up banging his leg on the foot of the bed nearest to them. He trips, and as if in slow motion, the golden platter of oven baked, cheese brown stromboli goes tumbling to the carpet and rests like a downed battleship sinking to the bottom of the ocean next to the stinkbug corpses.

Mrs. Lieber goes *flying* off the bed and goes to backhand Severus, spittle flying from her lips and her ankles surprisingly limber for being that

thin. “You stupid NIGGER!” she *screams*, in a voice that makes me jump, and I’m expecting Mr. Lieber to rip his son off the VR headset and tell him to stop being so hateful and edgy, but when Mrs. Lieber starts shrieking, and I mean eardrum bleeding, yowling like a coyote who has been zapped for tardiness to the opera style *yelping*, about how much money “Daddy” earned at his shitty managerial job for which he drives “two mother fucking hours each way each day” and how Severus should’ve “looked where he was going before he ran into his own programming,” the cold realization sets in that this shit actually *happened*. In the process of face planting himself, too, Severus-bot ripped the sheets off the bed, and the blood from Hans Karl’s toe-biting earlier is visible there.

“Oh my *god*,” Mrs. Lieber says, still panting from hopping up and down and screaming at the AI helper in a way that would’ve gotten her *shot* in Philadelphia. “Honey, did you make a booboo? Did he hit you?”

“I was clipping my toenails, mom,” Hans Karl says, sheepishly showing her the point where his nail ripped the side of his second largest toe nearly off.

“Dear Jesus Christ, Hans Karl,” Mother says, bending over and *kissing the open wound*. “That could get you sepsis if you aren’t careful! Fernando,” she says to the other robot, who is currently standing there like a mannequin with a tray, his process of helping “the baby boy” prepare for his date stunted like a broken line of code. “Fetch me my cleaning kit.” She sighs, taking her spectacles off to better inspect her son’s ridiculous injury. “Now listen, Hans Karl, I am your mother, and I’m telling you this to help you: do you remember the rules?”

“Yes, mother dear,” Hans Karl says, as the other automaton returns with a set of polishes, cleaners, disenfectants, and masks to rival an EMT’s briefcase. “Don’t dress like an n-word, kill people with kindness, and *be* the bubble that gives my kids their post perfect chance at life!”

“Exactly, good boy,” she says, blotting the toe and bandaging the thing. “Severus is one of the good ones that they made and that Daddy bought for you – for us, you know, for *us* – but you can’t be so reckless in taking care of yourself.” The other robot butler humanoid person returns with a new plate of steaming stromboli, and Mrs. Lieber turns to him and yells, “PUT THE FAN IN THE WINDOW AND GIVE ME MY CIGARETTES!” Fun technological note that Agent Braise briefed us on: *since they don’t have feelings, and since they aren’t ‘people,’ what we’re witnessing Mrs. Lieber do here is totally okay, totally fine* … just like ripping the plastic back off the right hand window as her literal, actual slave-bot installs a window fan that is so yellow and grimy on the propellors, you’d think it were a crashed plane. Mrs. Lieber turns away from her son, pulls out a cigarette thinner than one of her ribs, looks out the window with a far-off gaze at the

same driveway we pulled into earlier today, and then lights the cigarette and blows outward sullenly, the cold air taking the smoke away like some sort of cancerous, silent prayer …

"Excuse me," Tommybot says, interrupting the flow and pausing the memory with a massive-ass play button superimposed over the screen. "Am I to understand your fingers are curved, Hans Karl?"

"She smoked with me in the womb," the kid says. "And yes, she actually said that."

"I didn't know the point of this was for you to air your dirty laundry," Gerald says, scoffing, shaking his head and standing next to us in the virtual theatre like a man watching a tragedy on a newspaper headline that he himself doesn't *own*. "The fact these even got verified by the third party sources as real, accurate memories is a shock to me."

"I suppose you were working at the time?" I ask Mr. Lieber.

"Mother always said it best," Hans Karl interjects. "Your father loves you so much because of how much he isn't here!"

"Jesus," I say, shaking my head and trying not to laugh out loud at the wildness of these isolationists. "And you're telling me you went on a *date* this day?"

Without saying another word, Hans Karl grabs the controls, shifts the cursor to a point further down the video, and clicks on what appears to be an open air café where he's strolling on a woman's arm …

Mrs. Lieber's got her teenage son's hand around her waist in a way that's made to guide a dancing partner as they wander their way through the not-quite-Thanksgiving November air, the bustling of the Saturday afternoon crowd and their automaton conversation partners, waiters, and animals filling the brisque air with the concentrated joy of a holiday miniature. However, upon approaching the cold protected, outdoor, flame column lit Country Europe outdoor seating section, young Hans Karl's eyes drift to a woman/automaton, its impossible to tell at this point, truly, dressed in one of those Germanic celebratory floral patterned robes, at which point his mother slaps him on the arm with an open palm.

"Hans Karl," she says, totally offender, her hairspray embalmed locks making her appear like a dead first lady above. "It's a good thing we're *practicing* for your date! You want to keep your eyes on *her* eyes and *off* of other women!"

"I think she's an automation," Hans Karl tells her, dressed in an ultra-puffy jacket and in size 42 jeans fit for a man with as big a bones as him.

"It doesn't matter, she's dressed like a slut!" Mrs. Lieber says. They walk up to the outdoor podium, and Mrs. Lieber asks the probably real

maître dee to seat them in a place where they *have a little intimate privacy for their dinner conversation*, so the host obliges and seats them in a corner bedecked with heart and chrysanthemum black steel casings … and an ashtray, naturally, as the passersby float around them past the boutique shops and movie theaters.

"Now," Mrs. Lieber says, taking off her jacket in the shadow of the whipping flame behind the both of them. "Take me through your *politeness* routine!"

First, Hans Karl puts the silk napkin in his lap. Next, he ensures that his right hand, wherein the ring his mother gave him to promise her fidelity to him glints under the mid-afternoon sun, correctly places the fork to the left of the plate, the knife to the right, and the spoon on the other side so as not to get the slappy again. Mrs. Lieber smiles, and when the same blonde haired, blue eyed, cowgirl boot and hat combined with Dirndl wearing hybrid takes their order, she says, in a singsongy voice, "and what can I get you*, handsome*," Mrs. Lieber narrows her eyes and casts a look of pure disgust up at the robot.

"Excuse us," she says, in a voice cheerfully offended. "My name isn't Karen, but we're *practicing* for his *date* tonight!"

Hans Karl nods along, staring straight ahead at his mother and not at the automaton. "Oh," the waitress says, clicking her pen. "And who is the lucky lady?"

"I'm his mother!" Mrs. Lieber says.

"I think she means tonight," Hans Karl says, stealing a glance at the waitress as his mother lights a cigarette.

"He's going out with a woman named Maria, we got the arrangements set with her parents last night," Mrs. Lieber explains, and the waitress politely laughs.

"Say," she says. "That's a pretty wicked haircut you got there!"

Mrs. Lieber beams with the pride of an artisan being complemented at a gallery, her original hostility dissipating like the smoke towards the parking lot. "Oh, Lynnette," Mrs. Lieber says. "I'm sorry, but he's *double taken!*"

The waitress laughs, and I'm pretty sure Hans Karl cringes so hard the muscles on *our* faces are going to be sore, but then, after she takes their order – something non-messy for Hans Karl, schnitzel knife and forkable, and a set of assorted sausages for Mother she'll be bringing home to Father as a gift – Mrs. Lieber says, "Excuse me, miss?"

Lynette turns back around in time with the country stomp above. "Yes, Mrs. Lieber?"

"You were remarking on his gorgeous haircut earlier, correct?"

“I just said it looked nice,” the waitress says, somewhat bashfully. There’s a kick under the table as Mrs. Lieber’s boot finds her son’s shin.

“See what I told you?” she whispers to her son, using her hand as a shitty shield to prevent the waitress from hearing. “Women are checking you out *all the time!*”

“Is there anything else I can do for you?” The waitress asks, her eyes distant now. “I want to get your food order in before we get too backed up.”

“As a matter of fact, can I ask a favor?” Mrs. Lieber says, pulling her chair in so it scrapes across the sidewalk. “I need a second opinion: can you *touch* his *blonde curls?*”

“Excuse me, Ma’m?”

“It’s a Mom thing, I just *love* his hair!”

“That’s alright,” Hans Karl says, but then his mother cuts him off and hisses, “*Do it!*” The woman, who herself is a half hybrid and taught to obey her programmers to maintain the proper order of the world, gently taps the right side of Hans Karl’s head, which, thanks to our properly mounted head-pieces, we can *feel* as the skin crawls and the scar, unmoving, flares like white leather on Hans Karl’s head. Mrs. Lieber, meanwhile, kicks her son underneath the table with the lilt of a lover in her laugh and strikes a Marlboro too close to the waitress, who recoils and reaches her hand back while looking at the kid sullenly, saying, “Are you a fan of cigarette smoke, young man?”

“Of course he is!” Mrs. Lieber says, ashing it four times, fast, while looking around. “I smoked with him in the *womb*!”

ALRIGHT

Tommybot ripped his VR set off first, allowing it to spike to the carpeted ground like a bird dying of a heart attack. Gerald, instead of being upset at us as the strangers to the house, is shaking his head in disgust at his son, saying, “You need to grow up and stop living in that virtual world, Hans Karl. She never *said* she smoked with you in the womb!”

“You told me that!” the son says, his own face red and yet his eyes unmoving, a flatness to his reaction befitting an automaton.

“Yes, but she never said that to a waitress, and this is why these gentlemen are here,” He gestures to myself and the therapist bot, who is rapidly cross-checking the DSM-VII for how to categorize what the *hell* this is. “You’ve been spending too much time in your virtual playground recreating memories that never happened.”

“Says the guy who runs a PC cult!” the son says.

“It’s not a cult!” Gerald says, the sides of his Germanic neck reddening. “It is a willful venture of likeminded persons, as Agent Chausser fully knows, who are allowing the best of this world to live onward in

harmony versus having our lives fully run over by the types of robots who reflect such *treacherous* unreality!"

"If I may interject," the Tommybot finally says, looking at Hans Karl with the most sympathy a pair of UltraReal eyes can possibly reflect. "It is clear that there is a void in this household where Mrs. Leiber once stood."

At this, both father *and* son laugh, their argument interjected. "You should see my *dad's* version of her," the kid says, and at this Mr. Lieber hisses and moves to backhand the kid, who is chortling like a metaversal dashing troll who spams laughter around public parties. The Tommybot, in its professionally trained glory, the compendium of human psychological knowledge downloaded directly into its brain spinning at the velocity of *treat the symptom whilst identifying the root*, says to Hans Karl, "You have obviously built that world because you miss your mother, Hans Karl."

At this, Hans Karl deadpans to the Tommybot, "I built that world to process the fact she turned me into her proto-husband."

"Oh, fuck you," The father says to the son, turning around on his heel brusquely and moving past Tabitha, who has been a watchful observer set in fleshlike stone against the wall. "He's even *talking* like his mother."

"My father doesn't like facts," Hans Karl says. "And if he wants me to show you the place where I've been going, which, by the way, is his strictest competition, I'll gladly do so just to get the hell out of this place for a few hours. Do you guys know she *died* here?" Hans Karl asks.

"This is a situation which may require assistance from a human operator," The Tommybot says, looking towards *me*, who suddenly wants to be in the autumnal wind solely to smoke my own cigarette. I shrug. "Don't look at *me*, I didn't go to psych school for this!"

"This is not a situation prepared for in any psychological school," Tommybot asks. "If we may, Hans Karl, we could analyze your subconscious and attempt to deduce the root of this situation by analyzing your dreams."

"She's always dying in my dreams," the kid says, the robotic tenors trading back and forth. "One time she was dying of stage four cancer and drank bleach off the washing machine like she was chugging milk out of the jug."

"This is such high-falutin artistic bullshit," Mr. Lieber says. "Next he's gonna start talking about how much of an asshole I was when I left after she struck me. I have the police reports to prove it!"

"There was domestic violence involved?" Tommybot asks.

"Yeah, or I could show them the time she *supervised me* on that date!"

"Kid's mother wanted to be a secret policewoman," Gerald explains, as if he's talking about a movie character and not his wife. "She did volunteer anti-terrorism work and ran a personal blog to help people out

since she never applied her Master's degree in the traditional job market. She'd look for codes in receipts and shit."

"You know," I say, choking a laugh and pointing my own ring-dented right hand with my index finger up at the speechless Tommybot. "I must wager that isolation may have had something to do with Mrs. Lieber's disagreeable behavior."

"She would shoot automatics down at the range at the targets that look like terrorists because, as we all know, they aren't real people," Gerald says.

"She waited for the day a roving band of them would drive down from Philadelphia in an SUV and crash through the window on orders from a terrorist commander," Hans Karl says, and the Tommybot itself is beginning to open and close, shift and lick its teeth like a fish dumbstruck by the lack of water in the clean air above the surface.

"How do you generally do in school, Hans Karl?" I decide to ask, allowing the preposterous exchange to flow like a dammed river hungry after a storm. *There's a smoke detector right above him, dammit*.

"Decently enough," he says.

"Yeah, well he's been spending all his time playing his stupid video games and detaching from reality in his little creations." His father snarls. "Do you think anyone would *pay* to watch that vignette of your mother?"

"They just might, at some point," the kid says. "I'm still constructing the sequences with the guinea pigs, because Piggums," he says, turning his voice childish again in a high pitch. "Was here!" he finishes the sentence in that tone.

"Alright," I say, with the same verbiage but less bite than Tommybot's objection to the madness. "What we're going to do is take a look at this recreation center you've been going to, Hans Karl. You're of age, so there's no issues with some of the content of it, but as you may be aware your father's enterprise is currently in conversation with my partner, my boss, and I, and he's so generously allowed us to be transparent with each other in the hopes of clearing him of any potential wrongdoings."

"Ah, yes," Hans Karl says, copying his father's bite and shifting it back on the man. "My father and accountability, like crude oil in the ocean killing all those birds."

"Ungrateful little shit," Gerald says, at which point the Tommybot objects, saying that Gerald shouldn't be so angry, so aggressive with his son, but Gerald barks back at him, "No, I get to sit here and be berated for my lawful enterprise and for choosing to keep my wife reanimated in the way *I* want her versus this collateral damage inspired bullshit he's creating, and I want to talk about *my* anger, and *my* feelings! How do you think *I* feel seeing *her* that way?"

“You didn’t need to watch it,” the kid says, his face a flat smirk, and his father’s mutterings are interrupted by the Tommybot, rightfully, saying this group session has become somewhat unproductive, totally not due to anyone’s fault because the word *should* is a naughty, no-no word in the psychological cannon, but in my situation report, the fact the kid whose survived a brain injury, apparently, had it mischaracterized by both his parents, and survived the stomach churning emotional weight of what we witnessed him exorcise in that art hasn’t shot up a place of either humans, people, or hybrids seems to be a small miracle to glean, as is the address he gives me to pursue outside of town … and if Tommybot can get some human guidance and analyze *his* brain, we may be able to get an idea of what draws people to Lieber without having Tabitha pop caps in us for asking easy questions …

14

"He never struck me as a man who lost his wife," I say to Leo, allowing the smoke to roll over the lake where we're sitting, far away from the shoes worn by normals, hybrids clacking down the town sidewalks. "I still Google mine to make sure she isn't dead."

"He doesn't need to do that!" Leo says, hands in jacket pockets, staring straight ahead into the aquamarine expanse. The marina is nearly devoid of life, with this being one of the last refuges where the automation hasn’t entirely swallowed every bird chirp and squirrel scuttle and fish jump and dog bark and echoes of family laughter along the long-rusted grills.

"I know, but he didn't tear up, didn't balk at her claymation reincarnation in his son's therapeutic unreality … at this point, I suppose men like Gerald can just keep everything forever, if they want."

“What about him seems unshaken to you?” Montserrat asks.

“He doesn’t have lines on his face, circles under his eyes,” I tell him, wisping up at the water, the bench where kids carved names of lovers in big, curly knife script cold and hard beneath me. “I slept because I didn’t want to be awake when she left my life, Leo, smoked because each cigarette took me away from a world without her … and here he’s got a version of her planted right in his Spectacle.”

“Haven’t we all done that before?”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, for example, you have an idea of me, I have an idea of you, the father saw his ex-wife in one way and she legally signed over her name and likeness to him.”

“I thought they got a divorce?”

“No, apparently they reconciled,” Leo says, checking his notes on one of his four phone devices. “Kid’s agreed to have a BrainScan session with a DoctorBot.”

“Full hundred yards?”

“Yes, wavereaders, scanners … es un senal de Buena fe, or however you gringos say it.”

“A show of good faith,” I repeat, crossing my arms in the boatless chill. “I feel like we need to get blessed by a priest before we enter this Euphoria place.” Then, before I turn back to him, Montserrat already has the PriestAI pulled up on his phone app and asks it the question, despite my protests, *what blessings do we need to traverse the lands where men sin without question and succeed without fail?*

PRIESTAI: Despite the modern advancements in technology, the idea of original sin has existed since the inception of man fell from the kingdom of God. Therefore, despite how advanced technology has become, many, without God’s light, have come to understand humanity as a *zero sum game* of sorts, meaning one’s unyielding faith in the eternal light of God’s hope for a fallen species must serve as the signpost whether encountering false idols in wooden, iron, or metaversal form. While human advancements in technology and the usage of microchips have allowed the compendium of human knowledge to be readily accessible, there has not yet been an agreed emergence of an antichrist; as a matter of fact, it is extremely easy to talk to a harbringer of God’s good news with a simple, tithing subscription of-

“Ha ha ha ha!” Montserrat says, showing it to me and then chucking the entire phone in the lake in front of us with a whip and a splash. “Fucking *ya sabemos*!”

“How high is your Braise tab?” I ask him.

He shrugs. “We are *all* God’s children, *si*?”

-15-

Driving to Euphoria, its not just that nothing seems sacred anymore, it seems, as derived from Montserrat’s phone now floating at the bottom of a lake which was once a *town*, that things are almost *anti*-sacred. I voiced this idea to Leo a bit ago, who told me, of course, that the idea of what is sacred has been up for a debate, but with where Hans Karl’s been going, well, Braise asked us whether we wanted to be blessed before embarking on this journey. Pulling up to the nondescript, concrete building with nothing but a winding spiral of Romanic bodies on the front, a woman and a man and a spectacle wire in-between, we’re less ready to enter the portal to hell or heaven and feeling more like we’re about to get our car parked for us at a garage that smells like cigarettes and secretion – but not the type, apparently, one gets to use here!

“Are we sure this is the right place?” Montserrat asks, checking the GPS and crossing the fact this building – which would be a warehouse to the naked, or unknowing, eye – is situated a stone’s throw away from two

Mexican burrito restaurants, a German mall-front bar, and a Chinese place where the bots staff the entire *thing*.

"Yeah," I say, ashing my Pall Mall. "If you were running a mega robot brothel, Leo, would you want that screamed in the face of polite society?"

"I saw a man shoot a hybrid in front of you," Leo says, checking his bank account, both his private and his work one. "If we're agents of polite society, we're totally *fucked*."

"You should tell them that one," I say, steeling myself, feeling condoms in my pocket in the case we run into any hybrids. Here's the point, as enunciated by Braise in his falsetto stabbing voice earlier: if we find anyone, and I do mean anyone, who constitutes more human than automaton in this place being sold or buying for sex, meaning anyone, according to the law, with 50.00000000000001%, with more zeros than that, humanity, then this entire place is to be shut down and the owner, who we don't know, and Rajesh, the manager who has agreed to greet the two of us today, is to be arrested as well. However, as we steel ourselves into the cold and approach the hotel like spinning glass doors guarding the entrance to the place, flanked by statutes of lions fit for the pantheon, the waiting area, behind which is a black wall like a series of leather jackets stitched together into a safety net, the aura of Eastern-inspired scents, as if we've entered into a silken perfume trading post, doesn't strike me nor Montserrat, by the look of him, as being anything akin the vomit and sweat and sperm stained imaginations of the more conservative Agents who blessed us, fully, for undertaking such an operation. And the man behind the desk, flanked by two fully clothed, gainfully employed, actual women from the looks of them, one with red hair and one with brunette, both probably in their mid-20s and dressed with form fitting, breast hugging black *EUPHORIA* embroidered tank tops … all three of them could be working at a concert venue taking tickets or slinging merch, especially the mid-30s brown skinned man with an iron grip and teeth white enough to star in a gum commercial as his smile cracks through his beard and he says, "Gentlemen! We've been expecting you!"

"Have you?" I ask, shaking his head and leaning my dress suited elbows on the desk. There are televisions playing videos of women dancing, water sliding over their bodies and their *naughty parts* covered by mosaic befitting a censored Japanese adult film, in fountains that could be stolen from Barcelona, frolicking in miniatures that *sure do* look from here to be copies of Rockefeller Plaza, ice-skating around at Christmastime with their bodies unblued by the frigid, twisting air. There are statutes, totally nude, of men and women in garden settings, befitting Eden itself or perhaps just the backside of Olympus on vacation, and there's even an offer for tantric massages delivered by *hybrids who have devoted their lives and their*

bodies to the art of spiritual, erotic, non-explicitly-sexual elucidation of our higher beings on this fallen plane. I'm so entranced by the menu plus the musk coming off Rajesh, some kind of high tier cologne, that Leo snaps his fingers in front of my face and allows me to crash back to center with nary a reddened neck as Leo's credit card is already on the counter.

"You seem to be entranced without me even opening my mouth, Mister Duncan!" Rajesh says, laughing without much effort.

"Who told you my name?" I ask, reaching for my own wallet.

"I heard through the grapevine that men such as yourselves find your own minds conflicted at the current time," Rajesh says, taking Leo's credit card and handing it to his attendant with the Bella-like frame, the woodsy eyes and all. "You are a card swipe away from entering a place where all expectations, judgments, and restrictions are allowed to melt away from your bodies and where you find the best of humanity joined with that which allows us to advance past the apes!" Rajesh says, stretching his hands, full of silver and gold and diamond studded rings, to the sides, looking between the two of us like a carnival barker. Then, he claps them together, as if to slap his own self of his grandiosity with an echo of his palms, and deadpans, "Do you want to *read* the menu or shall I recite it for you?"

"Recitation," Leo says, his dress shoes folded at the heels as he leans against the bar.

"Excellent, I prefer that," Rajesh says, clearing his throat. "And, before the welcome video, which will demonstrate much of what I'm about to explain, would you like an escort through the facilities?" He winks at me, like a gymnast on the tightrope taunting the judge, and I realize that not only did someone tip him off that we were coming, he takes this as a *challenge*.

"Maybe just to show us the basics," I say, glancing at Leo. "What did you say your name was?"

"Rajesh," he says, his nametag somewhere else except on his bulky, bouncer-esque chest. "The owner is currently inside doing a quality control review, meaning he's probably drunk off his keister and smoking cigars that make the ones you were choking on in the parking lot look like duck pins compared to an elephant trunk, if you catch my drift."

"*Joder*," Leo says, laughing. "So I suppose we should get a day pass, or something?"

"If you like, yes," Rajesh says, putting his own hands on the bar. "We offer lodging options for up to a week for those who would like to stay in the superior version of reality, but I must warn you, since our Euphoria fully inhabits reality as compared to some," he coughs twice, "*Metaversal* options, the price tag for a long stay, especially thanks to our night options including private dormitories, thought correction, time melting journeys

past the limits of the human condition … what did you say the two of you did for work, again?"

"See, Rajesh, all of that sounds incredible," I say, pulling out my smurfed work card from my wallet, something that has a bank that if they research or google it will be totally legit but which ties to an account only three people on the face of the earth can access. "I think what I'm going to do, and I can't speak for my partner here, is open up a tab that'll close when I feel like it."

"Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhm," Leo says, turning to me. "En serio, Duncan?"

"Yes," I tell him, as Rajesh now regards me with a raised eyebrow, a glow in his smile. "For me, this is a spiritual journey that includes overcoming loss and which will allow me to bond with the community in a way that's necessarily deeper than surface level."

"How profound!" Rajesh says. "You're sure you want to just tab it? The day pass is only $190, without charges per automaton."

"We can go through all that in a second," I say, my heart pounding in my chest in a way it hasn't since my divorce, like the guilty kid who's been whipped who got handed the cookie jar after killing his parents, or something, in self defense. "I just want you, Raj, can I call you Raj?"

"You can call me whatever you want," Rajesh says, laughing, fuller now, as the agency card goes through the reader with a click and a green checkmark. "Mr. Chausser, I have to ask: what exactly brings you here today?"

"Well, you see," I say, allowing Leo's gaping mouth and trailing eyes to act on their accord momentarily. "I separated from my wife after living with her for years in the city. I took a new job, real corporate like, and moved out here to the country. It took me forty five minutes to drive to this place from where I live. Forty five!" His face reacts with mine in perfect sequence, as he nods his black beard-stubbled chin four times. "And I must say, when you mentioned *metaversal escapism*, I have indeed engaged in that-"

"Say no more, dear friend," Rajesh says, holding up his palm. "I know exactly what we're going to do for you. We're going to book you with our Emperor package – for you," he says to Monsterrat, pivoting. "You can choose between Knight, Duke, Lord, King, and Emperor, just so you know, all with the same daily entrance fee, but depending on what level you select, the prices for the automatons come at a discount – Knight gets two, Duke four, Lord six, King eight, and Emperor *twelve*."

"*Twelve*?" Leo says. "*Doce*?"

"Yes, now, remember, that's *automaton pricing*," Rajesh says. "And let me assure you, between usages, each automaton is disinfected in a procedure regulated by two industries, ours and the technology companies

behind them. They are fully washed, scrubbed like a newborn baby after being held by its parents, and assuredly disinfected in a way specifically designed to prevent transmission of any diseases, including the Coronavirus!"

"Madre mia," Leo says, reaching for his phone again, but that's where Rajesh stops him.

"Un hunh unh!," Rajesh says. "No photos once inside."

"I'm sorry," Leo says. "I need to check *my* bank account."

"We have four floors here," Rajesh says, staring at me with his intense, dark eyes. "Are you feeling classy or fully wild, depending on your budget, Mister Chausser? And will the two of you be touring together?"

"Yes, we will be," I say.

"No, we won't be," Leo says, coughing on his own and putting his phone away.

"Am I allowed to pay for him for the first part of this?"

"*Mierdia tio, que estas haciendo?*" Monsterrat curses at me, accidentally nicking the front of the desk before profusely apologizing to the waitstaff.

"If you'd like," Rajesh says.

"I'll buy him a session with an automaton, you can just put it on my emperor tab!" I say, wheeling on my heels to my partner in anti-'crime.' "My partner and I are two men who like to do a thorough evaluation of places like these in order to ensure that the holistic nature of the experience is better than advertised, if you understand."

"Absolutely," Rajesh says, as his orderlies move Montserrat's tab to mine to start things off. "Where exactly do you work for?"

"I consider myself to be a connoisseur of the higher pleasures of this planet," I tell him, looking around with a smirk on my face. "I must say, most places like this which I may or may not have frequented fail by miles in comparison to your atmosphere."

"Ah," Rajesh says, his face knowing, open. "Yes, you did, I must say, strike me as a man who has potentially frequented one of the fully human, illegal versions of what we've worked so hard to construct here at Euphoria – no offense, of course, at least metaversally is what I mean!"

"None taken," I tell him. Then, the orderlies take what appear to be two silken bathrobes – one colored purple, the other colored Red for Leo's *Lord* selection – and hand them to us alongside a pair of silken slippers. "What are these for?" I ask.

"These are for after we show you the video and deprogram a bit of things," he says. "You'll need to sign a couple forms, just basic housekeeping, considering the fact we consider the defense of our

intellectual property utterly paramount, as do the companies behind our lovely, goddess-level automatons."

"Understood," I tell him, as he leads us down a corridor to another, waiting chamber. "What do you mean by *deprogram*?"

"That's for you to be shown, not for me to tell," he says, unlocking a door with the words YOUR HIGHNESS, OUR PLEASURE in gold on the front, leading to what appears to be a theater with Spectacles, spic and span and spotless, waiting on a couple of daises. "And rest assured: this usage of the Spectacle technology to introduce you to our mission and to unlearn the judgmental world is the only thing objectively closer to unreal versus real in our entire establishment!" He shakes Leo's hand and then mine as we make our way inside, and he even claps me on the shoulder, his breath a refreshing spearmint to match his sheen. "See you on the better side!"

The door closes behind us, and we're instructed to place the goggles on, anticipation from all different angles colliding in our midsections …

16

In an intense blackness, a boy, probably no older than 14, kneels, presumably naked, his private sectors obscured by mosaic in a cartoonish, edge-curved art style, stylus drawn. Music – slow, constant, guttural sounds, similar to Gregorian chanting – starts at a very low volume, as the boy, who is naked and afraid, blonde haired, blue eyed, overweight – rocks back and forth. There's an awful smell in this place, some acrid, dried sweat and something else musk of particles typically meant for privacy, and he's looking up at a shadow cast in front of him: a man and a woman arguing, their voices sharp with the pointed ends of English with background, potentially Germanic, interlaid into the tone. Then, the voice of a man who we haven't met says, in a soft, but firm, way, "Has society tried to tell *you* you're worth nothing?" The point of view moves like a camera on a track on a film set, and suddenly *I* am the kid who is on the ground, booting up a laptop and looking for something called SALVATION in the search bar …

"Men, truly, are a violent, depraved, hierarchical, patriarchal, sub-human, sub-standard group of *laggards*," a woman says on an interview setting, with her hands on her hips and her tone that of an actress who is leaning into the lines. A commentator, a Black man in his mid-30s modeled after that gray haired CNN guy, nods along, saying, "Yes, mistress, you are absolutely correct. The future is *only* female, and men's role in the developing world was the result of a terrible gender and sexual binary which we are *all* guilty for, seeing as *we* created God." He smacks his papers on the desk in front of him, and asks her, "May I lick your feet?" …

In a world where sexuality and masculinity are criminalized …

The boy is now no longer me, no longer us; he's tied to one of those medieval, museum meant guillotines, and there's a group of priests around him dressed like the pope with masks on in rainbow colors representing a bastardizatin of the church: however, when they gather around him with scalding water, chanting *SOPRANO, ALTO, SOPRANO, ALTO*, the boy *howls* in pain as they pour the scalding shit onto his midsection, and it flashes away as his cries still echo …

In a universe where feeling attracted to anyone except the person you're legally bonded to is shamed …

Now, a young woman, her eyes brown, her hair the color of a wheat beer, stands in a modern classroom being taught by an automaton made to be as non-sexual as possible: she's covered in a cardigan, her pants a stitched curtain meant to make the front and back of her look totally flat. However, the young woman, the student is a step *further* down the line: she's holding a scarlet sign that says *I made my boyfriend cheat on me* and is dressed in a pilgrim outfit, from the stitched hood down to the flannel dress down to the boots which must've been inspired by the planting off the Mayflower, and the students around her, boys and girls alike, begin hissing at her like animals and bending over their desks towards her in spittle and with a couple shouting WHORE, SLUT, CUNT, BITCH, YOUR BOYFRIEND DIDN'T DESERVE YOU as the woman simply stands there and takes the words like a witch condemned to death by stones tied to a post…

In a country where automation has completely stolen lives …

A haggle of yuppie robots, through the sunlit sidewalk of a central-park-esque display, come click clacking down the sidewalk under some poplar trees in heels and dress shoes. Next to them, across the green spaces, a sign at the front of the park with handwriting on top of it that says FORMER WHITE COLLARS and OBSOLETE EMPLOYEES signals the start to a tent city enough to fill up half the park itself. Cheerily, the robots wave, coffees in hand and glasses on foreheads, past the people who are living out of a 20 year old LL Bean catalog camping section, cigarettes grasped in their hands and outdated technology – Nintendo Switches, PlayStation 6s, Desktop Computers (LOL) – sit and kindle their Spectacle headsets, shared between them, as portals to another reality to be defended with their lives. One man, whose blue eyes are shadowed and white skin is half between sunspotted and burnt, protected by overgrown hair, looks towards the automatons and grasps what appears to be an automatic pistol next to his jeans-covered leg, but then sighs and looks away from the group moving in such unison I can't tell if they're human, automaton, or a combination of both from how seamlessly they dance like the music down the staff now filling, roiling in our eardrums …

You might've thought there was no way out … but now … there IS

The chanting explodes into a full jazz or swing number, played by white people and Black people and people with skin like Leo's, too, as the camera pans over a Manhattanesque, high top, martini glassed bar where men like Leo and I, but also the kid we saw strapped to that table and watching his parents argue, sits among women *and* men who are ripped from the pages of Vogue level *banging*. EUPHORIA fills the screen in Looney Toons level word art, and the fast moving stand up bass powered music has the camera zipping through what appears to be a sports themed level where cheerleaders in high socks kick their feet up behind them while flirting with normal looking gentlemen, and then, down a spiral staircase reeking of expensive cologne and covered with red satin, there's a ground floor with the words PRIIVATE FANTASIES ONLY with a guy who looks surprisingly like Bill Clinton being grinded on by a robot meant to look like Monica Lewinsky, for those who still care to study American history, wearing a spectacle over his eyebrows in a dimlit theater with a disclaimer popping up that says: EXPERIENCE THAT WHICH THEY TOLD YOU WAS VIOLENT IN A COMPLETELY SECURE ENVIRONMENT **
**Euphoria.LLC is not responsible for the leakage of private information by third parties when fantasies are ported for domestic usage; we claim full responsibility for private protection of fantasies and customer integrity in a level 5 secure environment cybernetically and practically confirmed by private protection agencies; ask clerk for details!
Out back, after moving through a bar area with fully topless automatons twirling on polls with bodies that are shamelessly getting me, in my private viewing booth, a bit more excited than anticipated, there are a set of bungalows with pullable curtains around a crescent shaped swimming pool where men in the same purple or saffron or teal robes are being guided by bottomless and topless bots into *making their OWN euphoria*, and that's where the camera finds the formerly mosaiced, absolutely chest haired Hans *fucking* Karl himself, flanked by a robot about half his size and half his weight with blonde hair, blue eyes, and the tattoo of a scythe across her midriff on his right in a black bikini, and on the other side, a woman who looks too much like my ex-wife for me to not remember Farmer Faber "christening" her, before realizing it's a *standard model* they must have made by now, and he turns straight to the camera with his barely un-acne'd face and says, "Hi, my name is Hans Karl. I once was a kid who was told that I could be nothing just because my mother used *me* as her *husband*. Now that I'm 18, I'm subscribed to Euphoria, and if that bitch were alive, I'd kill her *again!*" The giggling, porn-set automatons kiss him on either side of his face at the same time, and Hans Karl winks at the camera and says, "Options available for those without large bank accounts!"

Don't let a fallen world tell you how far you can rise, the narration says, with everyone gathering on the back steps of the largest legal robot sex brothel in the western hemisphere, including the woman in the now-sexy pilgrim outfit, breasts puffed up and midriff ripped open, ankles flaring, with a sign that says MALE OPTIONS NOW AVAILABLE! And a wink of her barely-legal eyelashes.

EUPHORIA: WHERE ECTASY'S *ACCESSIBLE*!

Leo and I take our headsets off, or at least I do, while Leo remains staring forward into the blackened screen, assumedly, as Rajesh and the two orderlies with him turn on the lights in the Pre-Game Room. Everything's been recently sterilized between uses, so as one of the orderlies takes my spectacle and sprays, wipes it down, Leo's still staring ahead. "Leo?" I ask him. "Are you good, buddy?"

"Si," Leo says, his hands folded in his lap. "Is Rajesh here?"

"Si, senor!" Rajesh says, in a completely non-Spanish accent. "What can I do for you?"

"The young man," he says, without revealing what *we* know. "Mentioned options for people without large bank accounts. Do you care to elaborate on those?"

"Sure thing," Rajesh says. "Basically, so long as you're of age, we have contracts available for people who want to contribute to our vision while bathing in the spoils of victory over such a corrupt society."

"So … slavery?" Leo asks.

"No, no," Rajesh says, shaking his hands, and I send him somewhat of an apologetic glance but also with a raised eyebrow. "It's like, have you ever seen what happens when someone doesn't pay their tab at dinner?"

"It's a voluntary exchange of services not defined as an employment contract," I say, trying to find the words while keeping my heart from beating right out of my chest for various reasons.

"It can turn into an employment contract if one so chooses; a number of the models in that video volunteered for the exchange to lodge here for a few days in our overnight section. If you're a stickler for the legalities, I can direct you to the legal department."

"That won't be necessary at the moment," I say, tapping Leo on the shoulder and noticing its perspired. "Are you ready for the tour, Leo?"

"One more thing," Leo says. "Is there a way to … *explore* those options?"

This causes Rajesh to clap his hands together, loudly, and bend over in a laugh that causes him to release the tension in his fast-pumping stomach. I smile, complacently, but Leo, with the headset still on, pivots towards Rajesh with the same flat expression.

“Let’s see how your bank account is doing after your first euphoric experience,” Rajesh suggests, motioning for the orderlies to ask Leo for the headset with a curt nod of his smiling head. “Many people have the same concern when beginning, but find their limits soon before one might expect.”

They take the headset, gently, off Leo, who is now looking at both the orderlies like they’re able to be consumed, but Rajesh makes it a point to stress that they’re both fully humans, so they’re not available. “If you would like to see our customizable menu, if you have something in mind, we can show you how that works before we enter the experience.”

Leo and I share a glance, but with my hands in my pockets, I overrule him with a shake of my head. “I think we’re going to explore the natural course of things first prior to getting too far into our own heads, if that’s alright.”

“Perfect,” Rajesh says, taking out his jangling keys and inserting them into the lock behind him. “I must say, Duncan, I *love* the way you think!”

Part of my brain wants to disintegrate into the floor, but I tell myself, repeatedly, *you’re single now, you’re single now, this is for your job*, and yet, when the door opens and playful adult laughter reaches us with the smell of old-fashioned smoke indoors, it feels like a part of me is opening I can’t fully control, where the idea of *should* and *want* mix in a cocktail of their own without a known conclusion to their courses …

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Following our deconstruction of sexuality, Rajesh guides us into an area marked *private* where – with our credit-loaded, swipable cards in hand and our robes around our shoulders – we’re allowed access to a sauna, a shower section, and a locker room. Soaps, ranging from husky, whisky-evoking scents to top of the line Ralph Lauren, line the individual shower area, and there are other patrons of this establishment, divided by traditional gender, who walk around in shower shoes, sandals, and flip flops bearing smiles evoking, as Montserrat suggests, the accidental discovery of a nectar fountain. For me, I feel as though Braise himself is going to swoop in here on a gilded horse and fuck *me* for what we’re doing, yet Montserrat waves hello to one of the heftier, white passersby with a towel wrapped around his midsection and even *fistbumps* the guy. We head over to our lockers and, in ways evoking a fusion of the college gym and a Hilton level hotel, are soon on our way to the shower area. The spigot is designed to look like a fountainheaded mer-goddess, so perfectly sculpted, machine cut, it could only exist in the mind of an engineer first, and that’s exactly how I would describe the automaton woman – or is she *‘real’* in the old sense? – who begins talking to me from the screen inlaid in the ceramic tile patterned to look like the American flag in the wall before me. The water is

soothing, warm, and timed for four minutes to start, as the woman's voice over calming, plucking harpiscord strings accompanies her form, draped in a Grecian or Roman style toga with her breasts the same golden ratio as the very spigot below her:

"Good afternoon, *sir*," she says, her blonde locks draped over her shoulder in a princess-worthy wave. "And welcome to Euphoria: where immortality is accessible to *everyone!*" She holds up a picture, as she sits underneath the tree of life with silver leaves shimmering above her, of a man that could be any of whom I suppose are *us* now: probably mid-30s, unassuming haircut, a little between scrawny and brawny, and she strokes the moving placard's face with a *come hither* gesture before it zooms in on the dude, with her teal nails tracing each part of his body.

"*Do* be sure to wash your face, neck, chest, and under your arms. We are extremely strict, especially on the Upper Level, at maintaining a classy, top level atmosphere. If we find your scent to be lacking in terms of your self-respect, we can provide cologne for you free of charge to make *your* experience *extra*ordinary! In your shower stalls, you will find consistently, mechanized controlled shampoo and body wash dispensers with five different types available for your choosing. Be sure to scrub all the parts you'll want us pleasing *extra* well, considering the last thing we want is for one of our AutoMatrons to have to turn you off to *clean* in the midst of your *Euphoria!*" When she brushes her finger tip over the guy's nether regions, he smiles a bit, but its mosaic'd out enough so that I can scrub my own flaccid self free of any grime from engaging in Gerald's digital wonderland, which has become, to me, the equivalent of third rate porn compared to fucking an actual, walking machine that has had so much money poured into it, I almost believe the spokesmachine can *see* me! She continues, her barefoot, ankle braceleted feet drifting through the grass like a goddamn Grecian nymph, and then she holds up a hand as the words RULES OF ENGAGEMENT float into existence in a sparkling, cherry font.

"Once you've completed your shower, based on the *package*," she twirls her tongue over her lips ever so slightly. "You've chosen, you'll be allowed access to our exclusive, on demand menu where our AutoMatrons can be customized to fit as close to your needs as possible. If you've got the likeness of a celebrity in mind, while we can't legally provide you an *exact* version of that lovely lady, we can get you as *close* as possible," she says, with a huge, red x crossing a shadowed facsimile of Taylor Swift, maybe?, before she winks her own eyes again. Then, the camera follows her, and despite myself I feel her tugging me as if on a leash below the waist as she literally *unzips the cotton cloud dotted blue sky* and walks *directly* into a level of the club that must be different. She says, "Every two weeks, we have a different theme going on throughout our second level: this month's is

the *goddess* theme." Now, *without* the mosaic, she floats up to a toga-wearing, barstool sitting dude who looks like the guy in the placard come to life, and he's practically drooling down his borderline-formerly-what-they-would've-called-incel level face with a brunette woman on one side, and she slides into the other while giving him a peck on the check, her toga sliding to the side to reveal her modelesque breasts ever so slightly, which she playfully fixes after the guy gets a look. Then, while rubbing his shoulder, she says, "If you don't have a particular desire in mind, we offer 16 hour, open access to each of our floors with the opportunity to mingle with other likeminded seekers of life's true enjoyment, and even to have extended, confidential conversations with our ever adaptable, professional, chat loving women." The guy, who is red in the neck and has a beer tower sitting half drunk behind him, says, "So, Sir Reggie, how would *you* describe your Euphoria experience so far?"

"I *love* it," the guy says, with his arm draped around the nymphic, totally manic pixie cocaine eyed robot woman on the other side of him, with my own member between absolutely embarrassed, totally confused, and overwhelmingly, magnetically *snared*. "Evie and I just spent the best 20 minutes of my *life* in a private room themed like the Garden of Eden!"

"He likes my *ribs*," the brunette AutoMatron says, fluttering her eyelashes and stroking the guy on the chin. "Are you *sure* it was *20* minutes, Reggie?"

"Well, there was a two," Reggie says, turning back to our hostess. By this point, I'm just standing under the shower water allowing it to run down my back, as she begins noting that, between each session, another shower is required for us, and the ways in which the AutoMatrons are cleared of any STI, residual fluid, leftover smell, dirt, grime, and indecency are enumerated in depth on their confidential application *and* downloadable and viewer on their discreet website for those who *prefer the classical manner of doing things*. And, naturally, *please check with your automatron as to whether or not they are partially human and contain the potential for human life*.

"Jesus fucking *Christ*," I say, as the dude in the center places his arms directly around each of them and says he's *going for two* for the next one, with the brunette casting a laugh in the air and the blonde saying, "Check out our *sports* themed level when available, and *enjoy your euphoria responsibly!*"

Four knocks on my shower door. I quickly wipe myself off, slip back into my sandals, and am unsurprised to see Montserrat standing outside but am *quite* taken aback, so much so that I almost *trip*, to see him standing there in a full, crimson three piece *suit* like Madrid stole the *Great Gatsby* for an afternoon. "We need to dress in *style*," he says, before directing my

still-damp ass from the shower stall to a room where these rentable suits for the Upper Level are required for entry into the classic atmosphere. Before I know it, I'm dressed in a navy tuxedo with a white shirt and a fucking tie half the length of my chest like it's my wedding day reversed and shot into hell, and the thing is, no matter what Gerard Lieber manages to sell shmucks like me per month for access into his escapism without having to go bankrupt, whatever *this* is has the allure of entering a place so good it shouldn't *exist*, in a way he can't quite capture yet …

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The sheer sensory overload of walking into the Upper Level nightclub bar fusion is enough to cause me to stagger. Basically, they've got an infinite symbol carved in the center with gilded barstools all around it, with the mechanized, efficiency-optimized barkeepers floating between man after man of varying sizes, shapes, ethnicities, races, yet most of them looking like either me or Leo with a seemingly endless supply of cocktails like a hurricane of alcohol from the roaring 20s. If my eyes don't deceive me, they've even got an actual sculpture of a gray goose, historical accuracy be semi-dammed, swimming in the center of the whole thing while the cranberries and oranges themselves are being churned into juice from a roto tiller that's so soft it doesn't interrupt the music, which is currently spinning a jazz number that could move us so far back in time so smoothly it might as well be a memory spelunker. *And*, as Leo and I both notice, drifting towards the bar, they've allowed people to *smoke* in this joint, with the air being filtered in such a way that the smoke itself drifts upwards in a nearly constant, unbroken ocean stream to be replaced by whatever way they've made high class scents non-flammable. Holy *shit*. There are beds under tops made to look like huge Bentleys where men are lounging with AutoMatrons in high heels or with their rocks already off, sipping on fine wine and touching whatever they can without breaking the *no sex in shared areas* rules, and the security team appear to be a bunch of openly armed, trenchcoated, hat wearing studs who, from behind shaded eyes, sweep over the premises without even needing to flex a muscle and without us being able to see the eyes we feel. Down at the far end, near what I assume to be the place where they all lined up outside or are able to enjoy a meal or something between all the sweat that gets worked up in private abodes, there's an obvious burlesque section where there's an AutoMatron twirling on the pole in a corset straight out of Dita Von Teese, shit, they got her to look *that* close to the woman without appropriating her likeness? The bartender arriving with a clap of her hands on the bar and an excited look on her face snaps me out of the faraway burlesque trance, with AutoMatrons themselves lined up on the barstools already eyeing us, and I allow her to assume that those, as Leo is obviously finding them, are what

stole my attention rather than thinking about *legality* with my heart racing. We mention we're new, and she takes our information while spotting us some sorta craft Pilsner in a glass that would've gotten *me* arrested back *then*. I drink mine, but Leo's already making eye contact with an olive skinned, corset wearing 'woman' at the edge of the bar, and as I tap him on the forearm and drink the slight foam off the top of my glass while desperately hoping I moved my cigs into my suit in time, Leo's looking between me and her like kid caught between his homework and what he does when his parents go to sleep.

"Leo," I tell him. "I forgot my fuckin' *cigarettes*!"

"Ay dios mio," He says, loud enough for the AutoMatron to hear him and stop texting on her system-linked machine, while reaching into his front pocket and flipping me a long, white one. "Pienso que ese lugar no es *real*."

"I don't know what that fuckin' *means* anymore!" I tell him, burning cigarette placed between my fingers and my palm on my forehead. Hearing me, a long, tall man seated across the gap between the countertops to my right coughs three times, respectfully. I look at him quickly, like he might know who we are, or something, but when he taps his long one into the ashtray, I suddenly realize I'm dropping shit all over the counter. I thank him, take one from the bar, and hear him say, in a deep-ass voice, older, leather throated, "First timer?"

"Yes sir," I tell him, pivoting a bit. "My name is Dominic Chausser, and I woke up in *Inception*, is how I feel!"

The man snorts, his bowler hat tipping up a bit as the AutoMatron behind the bar refills his glass. "Life is but a dream, as they say," he says, raising his glass to me. I return the gesture, and we both drink, with me draining half of it and turning just in time to see Leo having shifted barstools. The AutoMatron waves at me, maybe asking him *quieres follarme con tu amigo*, but before I can freak the hell out and try to grab him away, which I already know would be as inevitable as trying to stop a freight train with my body, the older gentleman who I was talking with is lighting up his second long dragger, blowing upwards towards the filtration systems.

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The man pats the stool next to him, his jacket really more of a cloak from what I can see in the short, blinding white lights from the bar only changing in intensity from the beat of the music every few rotations with the song. Women in cocktail dresses, cabaret gear, flapper gowns, and even the same dirty pilgrim outfits – being scolded for venturing to the *wrong level* – float around us, but seem to part away from the older, white gentlemen like a bunch of lions from the head of the pride. They want to get to me, get their quota, be rewarded with their credits and however these

contraptions entertain themselves, but each pair of darting eyes is kept at bay by of the man seated at the bar. He's younger than I thought he was, the shadow around younger than I thought he was, the shadow around his face having made him appear older and his deep tone, mixing with the smoke that *assuredly* isn't weed but couldn't be proven to be anything different. He taps the chair twice once more, and when he turns, his commanding, dark blue eyes, set amidst a bald head and rimmed by the hem of the cloak patterned with the same fabric as a high class suit, makes me get a chill down my spine and makes me feel as naked as the automatons currently double-screwing Leo only a floor away from this beady center. I oblige him, sitting down, and he smirks at me while taking a lighter out of his pocket made to look like a skeleton holding a chalice. He beckons to the bartender, a cheery young fellow who keeps stealing glances at the AutoMatrons and craning his neck towards the stripper pole where one of them is performing topless for a crowd of hungry onlookers, and he greets the hooded older gentleman first before leaning into the bar.

"First time?" He asks me, extending his hand and a smirk. His palms are slick with hand sanitizer, meaning a couple of things at once in this place. I shake it. "I can spot 'em from a mile away!"

"You can spot a lot of things from looking this far," the hooded man says. "It seems as though our friend here hasn't found what he's looking for, yet."

"U2 lyrics!" The bartender says, his nametag, Michael, befitting his young 20's aura and biker-greased black hair. "Should I order him something, Sir Alex?"

"He'll come to it on his own," the hoodied man says, as I try to keep my dress shoes I bought for lord knows how much on loan from squeaking against the barstool and the counter right in front of me. The silence drops in an awkward way, like an off-beat drummer, before Sir Alex raises his empty glass, probably something mixed, and then pushes it towards Michael. Then, with a bit of a laugh, he growls, "Cops are always trying to fuck what doesn't belong to them."

"Woah, woah," I say, standing up, as the older man cackles and turns towards me with a knowing smile. "I'm not a-"

"They *all* say that!" Both of them say at once, with Alex extending an arm across the bar and clapping the guy in a brotherly way. Sir Alex says, "I love fucking with the guppies who sit there waiting on their black coffee afraid to stick their meat in something *realer* than what we are!"

I sit back down, my heart pounding, and inch my chair closer to the bar.

"Which plan did you choose?" Sir Alex asks, as he makes a 2 finger motion and then makes an A with both his hands, his right one's index and

middle finger cast downward and the index making the cross as Michael retrieves a bottle from the shelf. It's a dark green, emerald cast and labeled *absenta*, which is a word I have no idea about and wish Leo weren't currently getting corkscrewed upstairs to tell me what it means. *Absence?* "Not that it matters once you're here in the state *you're* in."

"I hate to ask this," I tell him. "But could I perhaps get one of those cigarillos you're smoking?"

"With or without the enhancers?" The guy asks, reaching into his cloak.

"Enhancers?"

"Christ," he says, as two green, gilded glasses are pushed over to us like two small versions of the holy grail by Michael. "You're a *child*, Mr. Chausser."

Immediately, my hair stands on end. "*How do you-*"

"I'll give you a hint," Michael says, taping the table twice with his open palm. "Sir Alex is here all the time, never pays his tab, has copious relations with all the women when he feels like it, and engages in partner connections."

I take a moment to process this, my eyes darting between the hovels sitting under wooden canopies near the walls. "You're a …"

Bahahahahaha. Sir Alex laughs the first genuine laugh I've heard from him, turning to Michael and raising his glass. "Duncan, you're a hoot." He raises the glass right at me, slides a cigarillo with his other hand labeled *merlot* towards my hands, and claps his down on the table while imploring me to take mine. "I'll only perform services on you if you *don't* pay me!"

"He's the boss," Michael says, and my blood seems to suddenly unleash from a dam inside me, burning my cheeks, my neck, and under my arms. *He knows my payment information because he's the legal owner*. I was envisioning Gerald Lieber or his son to be the patrons of this place, never considering the unholy saint which put the entire thing together and keeps it spinning on its axis. Sullenly, I sniff the top of the glass, and am taken back to a family trip to Greece where I had white sambuca.

"To doing what one pleases within the scope of our laws!" Sir Alex says, and I toast him. He takes a long drag from his glass, and when I drink mine, I can barely get through one gulp of it before a particular burning in my throat, similar to the whisky I had while spelunking Gerald's two-bit impersonation of this spiraling, Babylonian wonderland.

"What is this?" I ask him. "Absence?"

"Absinthe," he tells me, and my stomach cartwheels. "Again, entirely legal."

"So you're the owner of this place," I say, pushing the glass slightly away.

“And you behave like a teenager who doesn’t know what to do when his parents aren’t home,” Sir Alex says, taking another swig. “Light your cigarillo, Dunken, they’re artisanal. From Hamburg, even.”

I do as I’m instructed, realizing my seat behind his man, in the inverse of what kept the AutoMatrons at bay, gives me a particular kind of regality in this kingdom of desire. Lighting it, he passes me an ashtray to share, and then folds his clodhoppers one over the other before taking down his hood, revealing a perfectly sculpted, practically hairless bald head and a younger look in his eyes. “Every man, or woman, or person who enters these doors enters here with a reason, you know.”

“I can imagine so,” I tell him. “I’m just …”

“Overwhelmed,” he says, looking down while tapping his fast-burning cigar four times. “For the first timers who have been constricted by the outside world, it can sometimes be the same as a famished man’s stomach exploding due to a feast. You’ve yet to choose one of the automatons, am I correct?”

“Not yet,” I tell him. The one with the raven hair who was twirling on the pole is now providing a classy, yet unseemly semi-public dance for a man in what might be a bowtie from this vantage.

“That man used to be a University Professor,” Sir Alex says, following my gaze and sighing. “Once artificial intelligence took over the colleges, he decided to spend his money in ways that make more sense since the youth have the fulcrum of human knowledge swinging like a pendulum at their fingertips.”

“So he’s been here for years?”

“Many have been,” Sir Alex says, regarding me with a smile. “I recognize you from Gerald Lieber’s metaversal services, our *gateway drug*, is how I see them.”

I nod slowly, feeling the man’s gaze invade my brain like a succulent meal, drawing me close to what he’s promising. “And you make a living by providing a meat show?”

“No,” he says, taking a long drag of the cigar. “I allow others to live in a way the outside world cannot, and the financial benefits aren’t even the point.” He says the words in a dance with the smoke trailing from his mouth. “Let me ask you this, Duncan, or might you prefer Dominic?”

“Duncan’s fine, sure,” I say, narrowing my eyes at him. Something about the strength of the glass, the smoothness of his verbiage, makes me take another sip to match his energy parlay.

“If a man spends his entire life chained to the motion of the world, as you have, tied to the job, to the idea of what a man must be to one woman, and a man’s entire livelihood is reduced to ash under his heels due to the

presence of automation, why should a man not recognize his own status as a cog in a machine and transcend that in whatever manner he so chooses?"

"You mean giving up?" I look around at the patrons: younger, older, middle aged, mostly white, but black and brown and tan skinned too, and a section labeled MALE AUTOMATRONS blinking blue as a gender reveal in a neon sign to another chambered room.

"The world gave up long ago," Sir Alex says, raising his glass to me again. "You had men paying 20,000, 30,000, 40,000, 240,000 dollars to have chats with men on machines pretending to be models, supermodels, the illusion of care sold to them and willfully bought. You had sailors in Amsterdam get off ships and give themselves a night until the break of dawning day in the 1600s, and ever since man first fell from whatever perch it was decided was higher than this place, we've been falling and falling and falling ever since we invented the idea of height, depth, and distance." He pivots to the bartender. "Haven't we, Michael?"

"The absinthe is *strong*," Michael says, laughing nervously. "You've got Sir Alex *preaching*."

"No, no," he says, nearly through his cigar. "*Philosophizing*, as I call it."

"So let me get this right," I say, leaning in and squinting, feeling almost argumentative from the taste in my mouth and the slight burn. "You don't think *sex* is what brings people here?"

"Of course not," he says, scoffing with a smirk. "It's not sex in the traditional sense, or it'd be illegal. These automatons are at least more than 50.01% non-human. The Japanese, and the midwestern Americans, were marrying them and trying to have their pillows get legal status to inherit half their fortunes if they died in car wrecks. These automatrons are perfectly happy, because their very existence, as it was and is with women in less *enlightened* establishments, which I do not judge, either, but which get in trouble with persons with auras such as yours … they are the pinnacle of allowing man's desire to become limitless. And," he says, leaning into me and showing me his sapphire ringed right hand. "People don't come here to copulate, Duncan, just like you didn't rage at seeing Farmer Faber's ascendance through the automatron who reminded you of your wife."

"Excuse me?" I ask him.

"People don't come here to have sex, Duncan, nor to masturbate, nor to participate in orgies in a way that's the envy of every swinger's club to ever impersonate a pendulum on God's green earth," he laughs, draining the rest of his glass and then clapping it on the bar. "It's like Walter said to Jack, and not because you're a Nazi, Duncan: here, *you can have any future that you want*."

Chills erupts down my spine as though I've seen through a web of smoke cleared from a strong wind, but when I go to stand up, he firmly clasps my wrist in a way that makes me yelp. "Now, now, don't go running to Agent Braise or ping him on the facsimile. I know you've been enduring a tough time recently.

"He called you?"

"The inverse," he says, letting go of me. "Gerald mentioned you and that automated therapist dipshit had been poking around his property, and I told him, very forthrightly, I don't mind the presence of men who are open to possibility. Your participation in Gerald's service showed me as much – and your partner upstairs is *proving* it."

"So long as it's legal, it's no problem," I say.

"There we go," he says, standing up and gesturing to my absinthe glass. "You going to finish that?"

Steeling my stomach and feeling more caught than a mouse with a trap cracking its spine, I drain it, and then Gerald instructs me to follow him *behind the curtain of Oz* for a moment, so he can show me what some people have come to thanks to the world casting itself down, as he puts it, like a concrete lure dropped to the eternal ocean sand, where no light shines and shadows dance in rhythms which taught us how to move before music …

The place he takes me is dark, barren, a cavelike series of rooms only separated by hallways big enough for three men across them. He's going on and on about *non-disclosure agreements* and *protecting the confidentiality of information*, and the grunting, moaning, and strange shucking noises I hear as we navigate towards an empty chamber ricochet off my ears like echoes from a bad dream upon waking. There's a sterile mist in the air, as if everything in the connecting path is filtered through a system designed to make it smell like a hospital corridor, and by the time we get to our destination at the end of the hallway, a "demo room," as Sir Alex calls it, I feel as though I'm being led to a prison cell. It's a small thing: no windows, no doors, the only air duct a self-modulating, wall-panel controlled regulator locked currently at 69 degrees in the cold, windless way of a place that would be moldy if not for scent control. There's a metaversal headset of some personalized design, judging by the computer parts affixed to the sides and underneath it, way beyond the rusty Spectacle in my room, and Sir Alex beckons me to sit on the comfy, reclining chair in the center fit for a lord in the court of a mancave while he himself takes a seat on the satin sheeted bed underneath the vent in the corner.

"This is where our longer-term patrons choose to stay," he tells me, crossing one booted foot over the other, his ever-present hood folded behind

him in the privacy of the place. No security, except what might be a camera hidden in the upper right hand pocket of the ceiling like a cue ball shot for a point into the far wall of a underground billiard table. “Especially those who consider themselves to be *residential patrons*.”

Despite the layered, compartmentalized walls of concrete, insolation between us, I can still hear the thumps and echoes, whisking and moans in my eardrums as though I’ve surfaced from the ocean and not dried myself off. *Residential*.

“As in they don’t … they don’t leave?”

“Correct,” Sir Alex says, with a smirk befitting of a University lecturer answering a basic question. “If you’d be so kind as to turn on your FreedomWear, you will easily understand why.”

The thing is heavier than a lead football in my hands, and when I turn it over, the trademark, along with the same Euphoria script engraved like a signature on the side, the device purrs like a digital cat at my specific touch. “If you get used to it, it becomes a friend, *recognizes* you!” Sir Alex says. Steeling myself with a deep breath, I place the device over my eyes and allow it to boot directly into my sensors. With a whisk of a laser beam over my irises, it scans me, recognizes me, and then says, in a soft, androgenous voice, *Welcome to your Freedom, Dominic Chausser!*

“See!” Sir Alex says, with a quick laugh. “It’s even using your alias from the front desk!”

The non-disclosure form is bland: basically, anything and everything that happens on this device, or which has been *created by the community*, is intellectually, physically, and metaphorically (I’m assuming) protected by my signature on the agreement. *While it’s the express intention of Euphoria to have our mission and centralized location expanded in the physical realm, the artistic, private, and incorrectly labeled ‘deviancy’ expressed in the creative and mind-powered realms of the underground section are exercised in confidence; when we protect our own privacy, we protect the privacy of the entire community, and any broaching of this agreement is considered a violation not only of the privilege afforded by the FreeDom, but of your brothers, sisters, and countrypersons engaging in the daft choice to pursue their desires in a world that only lives to restrict them*.

In this moment, the eyes of the entire world are upon me: the kids sitting around the bar smoking their braised tobacco cigarillos, the automatrons, still partially human, somehow, or at least tricking my brain into thinking they are, just taking round after round of phallus in their mouths, anuses, ears, bellybuttons, knees, shins, soles, armpits. My chest is tight. Did I inhale an entire pack of camels? I just imagine the same types of people usually limited to the internet division, men of previous dorito and mountain dew stained complexions sitting in gamer chairs and in beanie

bags and in recliners, on sofas, all locked in their masturbation chambers while their life savings trickle into Sir Alex's bank account as whatever the ever-loving *fuck* I'm about to engage in or witness causes them to sustain life on this planet in the service to the next hit of dopamine that doesn't *need* to be "real" anymore because whatever meaning that word has is currently running down some hooker bot's lower *back*. Mother *fuck*, and I don't know if Braise wants me to sign this, but I, almost from an overhead distance, feel myself using the stylus controller to sign DUNCAN A. CHAUSSER across the page, and that's when I find myself in the middle of a system where the very sides of my brain are being statically tingled, like the headset's sides are trying to connect to something that isn't quite there, resulting in a peculiar, massaging sensation on the side.

"Unfortunate," Sir Alex says, as he clicks his tongue and *tsk tsks* a couple times. "You're not amalgamated, even?"

"No, sir," I tell him.

"Seriously?" Sir Alex says, standing from the bed and moving to my side in a way where I can feel him despite not being able to see him. "Part of me wants to dig into your skull myself just to see if Braise or his bosses found a way to sneak one by me."

I say nothing, instead deciding to review the menu choices in front of me still available despite not having implanted myself the way some others must've to get the *fully immersive, reality equivalent* experience promised in the virtual docs. *RAGE SIMULATOR* is one choice, with *SANDBOX EMPORIUM* being the other, and the *HALL OF HORRORS*, as the third, featuring a picture of what looked like a group of dudes featured in the welcome video with their hands stretching their cheeks and pulling down like a group of ghouls caught on film.

"Go ahead, Duncan," Sir Alex says, hitting me in the right shoulderblade. "Choose your liking!"

"What is the purpose of all these?" I ask him.

"Getting existential already, I see."

"No, I mean, what do people *do* with these things?"

In a flash, next to me in the virtual choosing space, Sir Alex himself appears in his avatar form, his body maybe a touch thinner than it is in the space next to me in the room, with his cloak only still partially flowing, luminous behind him in the graying light. Then, he turns, selecting the RAGE SIMULATOR, and says to me, in a way that reaches into my brain and almost strokes it, "everything, in the real world, they tell you you can't do, can be realized with a little bit of thought in here." He taps the sides of his temples with his index and thumb on his right hand, engaging the augmented, immune system adjusted part of him as if running a marathon with a limb that's finally reached the point of feeling original. And then, in

front of me, the same bot I saw Father Faber willfully, consensually *desecrate* on that stage appears in front of me, except instead of wearing the cross between a swimsuit and a cabaret piece, the facsimile of my former wife is in a type of black coat, department store luxury section level, and her hair is tied up behind her back in a way she'd *never* worn it in front of me, and she smells like some combination of lumber, sadness, and a cologne I'd never worn, something that gets into the nostrils and nests there in a way that feels like bugs.

"I just sucked the dick of a *massive* lumberjack," this spectre bot says in front of me. "And he was *way* deeper in me than *you* ever were!"

"What the fuck," I say, my heart buckling like a horse pulled at the reigns from a near-lethal whip of shock, anger, bewilderment. I turn to Sir Alex, and, despite trying to bite my lip, an absurd laugh, high and ringing and frozen as ice on a road half melted in the cold sun, escapes me. However, in the silence after, as the shadow of my not-ex-wife places her hands on her hips and licks around her lips with a smacking sound, popping them at me, Sir Alex is the one who also seems taken aback at my reaction.

"Go ahead," he says, gesturing at the robot. "Remember, Duncan, she's not *real*."

"Go ahead and what, you want me to fuck her in front of you?"

"Not with Gary's *cum* still *bubbling* inside of me!" The banshee bot says, crossing her arms in front of me in a way that evokes muscle memory of the night things *went final*. "You know I'd only have a kid with a man who can *provide* for me, Dunkie."

"Alright, what the hell is this sadistic bullshit," I say, tempted to rip the mask off, but then, before I can get my hands to lift it off my head, I freeze, because Sir Alex, in this arena, is stepping forward and handing me a *pistol*.

"You don't need permission, here," he says. "She's not *real*."

Something ancient and primal, cold and creeping sneaks out from the back of my spine, near the base where it connects to my lower parts and then climbs my spine like a xylophone being skimmed with just vibration. The smacks and howls, the grunts and curses which spiraled down the hallway … tons of studies debunked on video games *causing* and the *source* of all this … the fact she's not who she is and yet is needling me with things only someone who was able to look up my own reality would've known and the fact that I *agreed* to it … my stomach is ready to pole-vault up my esophagus, and that's when Sir Alex rears back and slaps her/it *clean* across her robot face, at which point the fucking demon, after adjusting her boneless neck from the strength of the blow and barely moving from the whiplash, *moans* herself and says, "Oh, Daddy, *hit me harder, please!*"

I manage to swallow the vomit right before it hits my teeth, and before I know it, the realities of men clapping asses, slapping cheeks, choking necks, whipping ribs has my neck bursting crimson: what was made in the shadows and promogulated online has seeped its way into reality, only to find itself at the bottom of something as now sitting at the top, the claps filling a hollow inside of me with nothing, nothing, emptiness … *don't be such a pussy, Duncan, we all know you want to! … Duncan?*

"I … I never…"

"Oh, *God*, he thinks it's *real*," Sir Alex says, from somewhere above me, the concrete or carpet or whatever the hell's underneath my knees rockier than a boatdeck in a storm. Something buzzes as the FreedomWear is lifted off me, and Sir Alex is apologizing, trying to show me the neck of the woman rubber-banding like a stupid cartoon, but when he hands me a trashcan and I vomit into it, he's now calling some line for some ascertained professional to come and *help me*, because *they've still got him feeling guilty for exploring the possibilities*, and Sir Alex has his arms crossed while looking at me from the bed like a father at a kid who missed the catch, muttering something about *too realistic, I went too fast with him* as some people or robots or THINGS that are either REAL or FAKE or BOTH or WHATEVER THE FUCK enter the room and try to console me with mouthwash, a blanket, and soft violin music floats down from the speakers covering up all this shame for something that never really 'happened,' right? …

19:

DATE: 12/14/31
SUBJECT: Lieber, Hans K.
AGE: 18 years, 16 days
REASON: Decodification of violent, intrusive, objectionable thoughts, codified and indexed via M/V, synthetic thoughts/mems
TREATMENT COURSE: Observe/correct
IMPLANT VERSION: 4.4, standard aug, automated playback engaged
SUPERVISING AUTOMATON: ThomasBot
CORRECTION PLAN: Direct challenge following analysis.
BEGIN VIEWING NOW:

The boy sits at a table with his mother seated opposite him, the outside world of the barren, autumnal grey and brown trees framing the kitchen window. There's a dilapidated fence made of wood posts, with three cross bars in the center the kind of wood that's been shaven down to the point its too smooth and round to be identifiable as any tree, stopping

nothing due to the gaps in the posts. Mrs. Lieber, as she was known, takes a copy of Hans Karl's middle school yearbook, with a strange collage of greens and reds, beiges and blues on the cover in a koladedioscope formation, and finds the section dedicated to his eighth grade class. For his part, Hans Karl – with markedly more hair, scar hidden underneath a strange, half-afro contraption of follicles on his glasses rimmed head – looks out the window and detests the pavement he can see from the window. However, before he can drift off to dreamland, Mother slaps the top of the kitchen table right between the cold plastic surface and the calked separators and says, "Hans Karl, its *impolite* to not pay *attention* to your *date!*"

"Sorry, mom," he says, turning back with a start and with a placid smile hiding the bite in his voice as well as cooking oil floating above water. "I hope you pick a *cheerleader* for me!"

"Ha ha, very funny," his mother says, paging through. "We don't want your dating life turning out like your *father's* …"

"What, so you don't want to have some girl have to pull me in from the rain like a wet dog?"

"Yes, and I want you to be actually able to cook meat for her on a grill when you get to that age," Mrs. Lieber's got her skin colored talons, filed as meticulously as her smoked-yellow teeth were brushed, clutched onto the sides of the pages tighter than she used to when she flipped through the daily Soap Opera digests as a girl, prior to all the actors and actresses, due to the grueling work schedule, being replaced by automatons of Sonny Corinthos, etcetera. "What about Victoria DeWitt?"

Ooooh, *Vicky*. Immediately, Mrs. Lieber uses the tablet sitting next to her, her indoor jacket a dark black against the sparse white of the wood like a chess queen sitting in a trophy box, to Google the girl's name: she's got light blonde hair that'll probably darken by the time she graduates, and according to the records, she has a 3.6 MS GPA, participates in field hockey and runs track, and has only had one in school detention for calling the homeroom teacher a shaved cunt.

"Ehhhhhh," Mrs. Lieber says, before Hans Karl even tried to respond. "She's definitely got the looks you're looking for, but her demeanor and her lack of discipline probably wouldn't be good. What's the number one rule, Piggums?"

"Piggums needs job!" Hans Karl squeaks, and his mother laughs with a flattering brush of her eyelids.

"What's the *other* number one rule, in addition to being a *provider?*"

"I need to make sure the woman I'm dating I could envision marrying some day."

“Exactly, and this family doesn’t need *any* more lackadaisical, loud-mouthed bitches – *I* own the monopoly on that!” Mrs. Lieber swipes next on the digital display as if she’s using the middle school version of Tinder to select her son’s future mate 4 life, and then she passes the book back to her son and goes, “Okay Hans, *your* turn!”

Hans Karl passes through the pages, and then, half-jokingly, flips to the athletic section. There’s a particular young woman with black hair and dark eyes, who didn’t really play any spots, from what he could recall, that said, in her not so innocuous, teenagerly way, that she wanted to *suck his ball juices*, whatever that means. So, he selects her from the lineup, and Mrs. Lieber pulls up her personal information as listed on the Date-a-Base with a squinting of her crow’s feet and a tapping of her long cigarette into the Jesus-shaped ashtray next to the window, the fan humming in the background to keep the air flow in the right kind of dimension and to protect, as she calls them, “her lovely son’s virgin lungs.”

“Oh, Hans Karl, sweetie,” she says, suddenly with tears coming into her eyes. “I just *love* how *real* you are with women! She’s not a cheerleader!” Her quick flash of pride and flicking of her irises towards her son with an appreciative smile, however, stops right after she clears her cheeks with a kitchen handkerchief and she looks at the grade point average. “Ugh, my little darling, you might’ve been letting your *other* head think for you, though, if you know what I mean. Have you *seen* her grades?”

“No, mom,” Hans Karl says, folding his hands on the table and sighing. “We don’t usually talk about school. Plus, I wrote a *song* about her!”

“Lovely,” Mrs. Lieber says, swiping the young girl’s profile away again. “Well, I’m vetoing her. Her parents are both contractors who haven’t even begun to explore the parallel reality to this one, they’re living in the *stone* ages.”

“But doesn’t that mean it’d cost *less* to date her?”

“Don’t be cheap,” Mrs. Lieber says, sniffling hard, her eyes narrowing. “My first husband, as I’ve told you, would pretty much try to talk to anything that moved in order to show his interest prior to the amazing arrangement system being legally implemented.”

“So he had to actually *talk* to women to *date* them?”

“Yes, and I must say, unfortunately, despite your dashing looks, thanks to your father and I, the amount of time you kids have been forced to spend on the internet, or strapped into your chairs, made some of you prefer the non-real thing to the real thing. It sort of forced our hand,” Mrs. Lieber says, drolly scrolling through the technological pages without a *single* drip of irony. “Here, let’s sort the little cherubs by their *academic* standing! I was going based on alphabetical, and you were scrolling through the sports

pages worse than your father unsupervised … *here* we go, how about *this* one?"

Hans Karl looks at the selected woman, back at his mother, back to the woman again, and then sighs. "Maria *Taylor*?"

"Yes!" Mrs. Lieber says. "She's ranked *four* in the overall standings in your ninth grade class! It's like the playoffs: she could easily be *first* by the time high school is over!"

"She's …" Hans Karl sighs again, the centers of his dress shirted arms dampening. "She is …"

"What?" Mrs. Lieber asks, leaning across the table with a sparkling, slightly detached excitement popping in her eyes like a sparkler. "Do you not find her *attractive?*"

"She's just a little *off*," Hans Karl says, running his tongue over his teeth.

"A little *off*?" Mrs. Lieber repeats, snorting, then chuckling a bit at her son. "Aren't we all. I know she isn't looking like the prom queen as of yet, but you've played enough sports simulations to know, Hans: it's about how you draft in terms of their *future development*. Plus, if she turns out to be a stunner in a couple years, your father and I won't have to break the bank getting her to sit across the table from you!"

"But what about the fact she's got *two* passports?"

"What does that matter?" Mrs. Lieber stands, walking across the floor in her ankle-high socks and pressing a button on the chromium paneled kitchen wall. "We'll pay her parents in Euros if they want them. *Gerald, we've found our winner!"*

Mh MyINg MoHam!

"What was that, honey dear?"

"I'm playing *chess*!" the voice responds though the intercom.

"Well, pause it!" Mrs. Lieber says. "And I thought you gave that up!"

"I only have 15 minutes left on my clock!"

"I don't care, we found the winner of the Hans Karl lottery!" Mrs. Lieber winks at her son. "Is piggums happy with the finest candidate who might *replace* mommy if all goes well?"

Hans Karl nods, looking down at the blue haired, young-young professional blazered, model-angle face of the real woman who is so unlike the comparisons already drawn into his mind. He might have to work himself a bit to get fully attracted to her, based on where *he's* been going where his parents aren't around, but by the time his mother's finished talking to his father about exactly how much they're going to shell out for the *real, true date*, he's already convinced his mother, already dying in a way they didn't know, to allow him to wander back upstairs, feeling like he hadn't really done anything, and that there was something he should've

done which he never could have, despite not being able to say exactly what it was …

20

The coffee shop is a small one, clustered amidst the same buildings (the Melting Pot, the Red Robin, the movie theatre) constituting the one strip of civilization close to a city in the entire country wilderness: at the wire mesh table, underneath the sparkling lights of the mid day sun and the soft, jazz music playing on the speakers, the human sized guinea pig with the name tag Hans Karl is perfectly placed so that his talon-like nails can curve over the wire mesh feet of the chair. He is dressed, exactly as mother wanted, in his Sunday best: the buttoned up shirt and the slacks befitting an altar guinea pig, practically reeking of the cologne she sprayed onto him and with the *remember, she might be replacing me* whispered in his furry, triangular ears still echoing there. His spectacles are affixed to his snout in a way befitting an old fashioned artist or a college professor, and the waitress, in the steampunk theme that all the kiddos are raging about, has already taken his order. Across the table, Maria, affixed to her phone, has her azure hair pinned into a pony tail, her blazer and her jacket royal purple and muted black, with her eyes already delighted at the fact the check cleared in her father's bank account this morning for the entire endeavor, and her cut, thankfully, is rather easily attained thanks to the gentlemanly manners of the fucking specimen seated across the table from her. The waitress arrives again, clinking down an expresso in front of her and whatever's in the cup in front of the pig, something that "wouldn't color his breath the wrong way if they started kissing," at his mother's yellowed teeth mouthed advice, and, as she puts a couple sugar packets directly into the brew, she daintily stirs the spoon as the man sized guinea pig bends down and licks the coffee, black, placed in front of him four times.

'So," she says. "Are you enjoying yourself so far?"

"Ennnnyhhhhh," the guinea pig responds. "Piggums likes *coffee!*"

"So do I!" she says, looking around the outside patio at the other persons either hunkered down over laptops like college students on a finals push or elderly patrons reading the newspaper, the automatons having delivered it to them in a way perfectly respectful of the bio-built past. "We have so much in common!"

"Ennnnyhhhh," Piggums affirms, his arms sticking out at his sides in the threadbare suit comfortably. The silence between them is thicker than the creamer, but Maria checks her phone for the most recent messages and asks, "Do you have an Extasy account?"

"Ennnnyh," Piggums responds, in a downcast turn.

“No?”

“Mother doesn’t allow Piggums to use his real name. Says cyber criminals might jack info.”

“Psssssh,” Maria says, with a tilt of her modelesque chin and a polite laugh as the pig thing drinks its brew again. “What’s the username?”

“Hans Kar-ell L,” she says.

“German? Isn’t your last name Lieber?”

“Ennnnyh,” Piggums says, intensely trying to make eye contact with her instead of staring at her mouth exactly as mother taught him to do.

“Found it!” Maria says. “No profile picture?”

“Ennnnnyh,” same downcast tone. “Mother says that weird men may take pictures.”

“Oh, you think *you* know weird men,” Maria says, following the account. “Just wait until people start asking you for pictures of *those* bad boys.” She kicks the talons under the table with her black boots. “What do you like to do for fun?”

“Piggums likes games.”

“What sort of games?”

“Shooting games or strategy.”

“Nerd,” she says, rolling her eyes and drinking the coffee. “I’m a bit of a gamer myself!”

“Ennnnnyh,” Piggums says, watching as another couple strolls through the coffee bar. They’re a bit older, maybe college age, locals, by the looks of them, the woman and/or automaton in a fall flannel and the supposed boyfriend in some sort of biker jacket: taller, leaner, like the men Piggums sees in the videos he watches when his parents do the *you don’t love me!* thing and he can hear them. Maria follows his gaze, and, stunningly, the woman, the blonde who was on the arm of the guy who Piggums immediately assumes is an athlete, recognizes Maria and breaks from the coffee line while her bearded boyfriend looks on in something between admiration and surprise.

“Maria!” she says.

“Holy shit, Diedre!” Maria says, standing up, closing her phone for the first time and getting up to hug the woman. Piggums follows his manners training and stands up as well, and after a quick hug, the blonde woman stands next to Maria and daintifully shakes the curved fingertips of the guinea pig. “When did you get back stateside?” Maria asks.

“This summer,” Diedre says, regarding the guinea pig hybrid with a raised eyebrow and crossed arms. “Who is *this* joining you today?”

“This is Hans Karl L, according to his Extasy!” Maria says, giggling. “His parents and mine made an arrangement.”

“Oh, you dirty businesswoman,” Diedre says, with an open mouthed, bleached teeth laugh. “I was gonna say, I’m *surprised* to see you with him!”

“Well, he’s what, top 10 in our class? And your father went to Penn, right?” Maria asks the Pig.

“Ennnnnyyyyh,” Piggums responds, sitting back down with a soft plop of his fur-covered tuckus. “Piggums Mother said Piggums needed to get out more.”

“You chose the right one!” Diedre says, with a wink towards Maria. “Yeah, I just got back from Berlin this past summer.”

“Ughhhh,” Maria says, sitting down herself and pivoting towards her friend. “I’m so jealous.”

“Yeah, well, being back here and dealing with the BS is always a culture shock, but get this:” Diedre says, leaning in. “They might be offering me an *internship* where I can *study under the CAO!*”

“No *way!*” Maria says, excitedly clapping her friends hands and leaning in. “The CAO chooses?”

“Yeah, and because it’s part of the study abroad externship, plus the fact I did the exchange, I might even get to *model* for the automated region!”

“Ennnnnyh?” Piggums asks.

“Oh, yeah, let me explain:” Maria says, turning in her chair. “Diedre graduated a couple years ago and got this sexy internship from her college where the automaton Chief Executive chose *her* to help them *write better!*”

“Shiiiiiit,” Piggums says, clacking his little hands together with their curved fingers. “Piggums says congratulations!”

“Thank you, thank you, you have a lovely sense of *style*,” Diedre says, her boyfriend having made his way over with two steaming lattes in his hands. “Maria, you’ve met Dean before, Dean, this is Hans Karl! He’s on an arranged with Maria right now!”

“Daaaaamn,” Dean says, in a low voice, pulling up a wire chair for himself as well. “Lucky bastard. I had to *work* to go out with Diedre!”

“Oh, don’t worry, Dean, it’s only the *initial* package,” Maria says, with a disappointed glint in her eyes. “How’s the AFL been going?”

“Decent,” Dean says, inching a comfortable distance in his Wranglers next to Piggums. “People really need to learn how to use their brains better. The guy pantomiming the wide receiver actually dropping passes made the HC want to kill him.”

“Do you play any sports, Hans Karl?”

“Ennnnnyhhh,” the pig says, in the same downcast tone. “Piggums had an accident when he was young. Can’t play sports.”

“Not even AFL?” Dean asks, taking a sip of his latte.

“Piggums has metal inside his head.”

“Oh *shit*,” Diedre says, and now even Maria’s leaning in across the table with her elbows planted there. “What happened?”

Piggums twitches in his chair, making a guttural, displeased sound and practically vibrating from his chest cavity. “Mother was at home with Piggums. Piggums played on a chair. Piggums fell backwards, piece of block hit Piggums behind the ear.”

“So?” Maria asks, sharing a glance with Diedre. “Didn’t your skull protect you?”

“Too young. Block pierced Piggums vein. Head filled up with blood. Parents got hematoma type wrong, doctor had to slice Piggums brain, Piggums can’t play football, part of Piggums skull came out and had to be put back in!”

“Jesus *Christ*,” Dean says, with a hint of actual sympathy curving his tone. “And that messed up your fingers?”

“No,” Piggums says, twitching the three on his left hand. “Mother smoked in the womb.”

“Wow,” Diedre says, crossing her arms tight and looking at Maria. “And how much did they front for this, Maria?”

“Too much,” Maria says, asking for an apology from Hans Karl with the look on her face, stretching thin, and the quick sip of her cup. “I don’t mean to be offensive, but his mother’s a little … hovery.”

“Ennnnnyhhhh!” Piggums emphatically agrees, as the clock timer for the hour of their date is nearing its conclusion. There are a couple interceding factors: it turned into a double date, there was only *one* hug at the beginning of the two Mrs. Lieber asked for, the fact paying *premium for the real flesh* in the competing Automaton market is getting infringed upon by what the internet people call a *Chad* sitting next to him. At the rating of the entire experience afterward, and shortly before Mrs. Lieber’s fatal lung cancer diagnosis, Piggums will mention the fact that he felt a little bit intimidated by the tall, college age football player’s ability to control an automaton so flawlessly when he Googles the team name later, meaning the second date will depend upon an adjustment of price and an admission from Maria’s parents things could have gone a bit better. However, after some more talk about the merits of living in Germany versus the US and having the privilege of the robots model themselves after the writing employed by Diedre, when time is up and they’re ready to go, seen in public like the rest of them for once with a beautiful woman as his date, Diedre and Dean bid their adieus as Piggums, emboldened by the caffeine and feeling reckless due to the discussion of how Bubble Boy got his scar, goes to *kiss* Maria in front of the crowd, but before his fang-toothed chompers can hit her lips, she places a single finger there and blocks his lips with a shake of her head.

“Sorry, Hans Karl,” she says. “They didn’t pay for the *PDA* package.”

“Oh, throw the poor thing a *carrot*, Maria!” Diedre calls, as her and Dean, hands held walk away across the side. And when Maria obliges, leaning in, pecking Piggums on the cheek with her eyes closed in the way a friend might congratulate someone who stays there as they should, according to the perfect society in which Hans Karl found himself, his eyes, for the first time, glaze with a vision of burning, pure fire, a kind of rage where the part of his brain that could accept whatever privilege of dating a *real* person doesn’t quite go there correctly, and when the timer’s up and Mother pulls up, hacking her lungs out and in a more revealing dress than what Maria wore herself, Piggums tells her *it was fine* on the way home, and when Maria accepts his Extasy re-follow and he sees the pictures of her ex on there, all cowboy and hockey shouldered and manually chopping wood somewhere in the menial way the bios do now that the advanced ones run the world, a cold pit opens in his stomach underneath the patterned fur that not even his mother’s offer of *actually* lip kissing him (just briefly, there’s nothing wrong with it!) can’t even assuage when he goes to dream that evening …

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That night, Hans Karl dreams he is a guinea pig himself, at normal size, dashing through a field. Something behind him, something untouchable, something unknown, something large and daunting, fast and unspoken is chasing him. He runs through the grass, dashing through the high stalks, his virgin lungs panting and the air itself, chilled and then hot, pumps through his lungs in a rapid manner, twisting the same way his small body does. The foliage in front of him is itself an ally of the force behind him, and the sun from above is obscured by a shadow that’s thin but circling, growing. No matter how hard he runs, his soles are blisters. From somewhere, he hears the sound of his mother puking in the toilet from all around him, bile and blood hitting porcelain in a way that’s more befitting of a submerged pool rather a field itself, but no matter how hard the pistons of his hips pump, the thing behind him looms and chases even faster in a spectral manner that would have him sitting straight up in a pool of sweat but for the fact his exhaustion presses him down. Then, from above, the shadow melds into an arrow sharp enough to pierce, and with a blinding pain, the true talons sink into Piggums shoulders and lodges there like a bullet from a time before the percussion of a trigger, the spark and flash of exploding powder. He’s sitting in front of a computer, screaming silently, mouth fully open and eyelids turned inside out in the funny way that made kids used to laugh when he was younger, but then, he’s ripped up from the field in a way where it feels like some cruel god ripped him from his chair and lifted him through the ceiling, and the pain whirlpools and mixes with

the sensation of flying, the utter shock and bliss of getting far off the ground as the inevitable beating of those powerful wings carries him upward, meshing into the sky as the beaked creature finally catches him in a way that's the opposite of safety, defying gravity as the crimson blood from his wounded back falls in droplets on the ground and splashes onto the stalks in a way that would be art from the ground view of those who never knew how hard he ran, how quickly he breathed, the trip towards the unseen stars hiding behind the clouds an inevitable fusion of what was then and becomes now in the angular rise of time's dive and ascent itself …

… he's back at the coffee table again, except this time, what sits across from him in the sparse ghost town of the shopping plaza, only the streetlights illuminated in the evening hour, is a version of himself, with a beard like Dean's except blonde and spectacles unmarked by time. This version of Hans Karl, the one who never existed, looks only like his father in the shape of his face, handsome by some regards, but not by the bulging gut nor the fading hair, the bowler cap befitting the same streetlamps of a homeland he does not know covering his balding spot and his abdomen actually visible in the trenchcoat. In the chair between them, smelling of hospital cords and emergency fluids, the sterile kind of unnatural saving used to reverse infant organ failure, is the infant, it's head wrapped in gauze and seated upon a satin pillow smoother than the head that was felled by the side of that block. Across the table from him, the future self slides a folder, and when Hans Karl shies away from it, the gloved man who reeks of the same cigarettes that caused stage four in another person, another realm, beckons him to open it with palms. Inside, there are polaroids of Hans Karl, now of age, fucking a robot with blue hair that looks *exactly* like an older Maria, but different, the unnaturally perfect curves of her body in programmed ecstasy while Hans Karl, 50 pounds past where he wants to be and barely able to maintain himself due to the wires in his own brain being crossed, the metal warping the signal between the therapist and himself and beeping in the grocery store, almost reluctantly places himself in the place he thought he wanted to be, needed to be, in a way that feels like cheating more than a broken vow. The future self opens his palms again with a smile, and says, with his own spectacles turning to sunglasses in a whiplash, "You gotta make do with what you got, kid!" Then, he moves the photos with a shutter and a swish of the polaroid paper and displays the broken bird script curved into disorder by the reality of the injury scrawled via ballpoint pen on the bathroom wall, the same one where Mother vomited her guts out, saying:

On the white wallpaper in a way his father will plaster over newly once she’s dead. He produces a silver hammer from his inside pocket, and, as if taking a vote, the sentient infant with the wires sprawling from his nose, around his hear, even from the fluids they needed to give him anally before he had any idea of what that meant, nods his head. The future version of Hans Karl stands up, and, using his black gloved hands like a conductor in front of a soloist, beckons for Hans Karl to do the same. He obliges, and when he grips the hammer in his hand, it’s as though he's the king in the Lord of the Rings which his father watched on repeat and quotes to him finally finding his sword. From beneath the bowler hat in the shadows, the older Hans Karl nods and clasps his hands behind his back in the respectful manner he used to see his grandfather do, and then, with the kind of strength that would make him a shoe in to train a robot how to break shit, Hans Karl *slams* the hammer down on the text on the wire table in a single strike. The older version nods. He smacks it again, the metal and metal sparking as the picture bears an indent, and with the infant on the pillow at a safe distance back, Hans Karl hits the picture so hard the metal craters. He slams it again and again and again and again, breathing, his face contorting in a kind of rage he had to teach it to show, and he hits it again and again and again, again and again and again, the table bending under the weight of the blows as he imagines it’s his father’s face, his mother’s dead skull with a cigarette shoved in her eye sockets the same way she stuck it in her mouth when he was in the womb, and, panting as though he’d just run through the field again and survived the diving hawk, he slams it five times so fast the claw end nearly ricochets back into his own arm, but thankfully, the table has crumpled to the point where the legs are now holding up what might as well be a wire sieve, meant to hold nothing, and each resulting blow from the hammer’s flat end echoes through the empty plaza in an alien, ringing beat to some percussion marching in a way humanity only understands in the tears forming at the corners of the kid’s, the young man’s eyes to mix with the sweat, with each palm blistering grip of the hammer spiking up like a blink on the machines tied to the infant’s chest and skipping like the awkward rhythm of the conversation he was never taught to step towards, and which his parents never took the care to ensure was addressed because he was *normal* SLAM *fine* SLAM *he did GREAT on his elementary school tests!!!!* BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG ***CRACK***

The shredded, crumpled pieces of the signature are now senseless mush sprinkles onto the concrete in an unearthly rain of white and shredded, thin script. The wires in the center curve and sink into the concrete the same way the scars from the incisions pattern across Hans Karl’s brain on the MRI. He sits down, catching his breath, but the man

across from him beckons him to stand again. He obliges, and when he does, the man removes his bowler hat and reveals his head *is* still misshapen, a future where even what happened in unescapable even in the fantasies that happen while asleep, but the man is bald versus having his hair touched and patted like a dog as evidence of what was still beautiful in that which was turned ugly by those who *love the most*. And when he hands him the bowler hat, Hans Karl stands again, placing it on his head, and from the still standing wreckage of the table underneath the pallid streetlights, he picks the hammer up, and instead of smacking his own hand and causing himself broken bones, he spikes the hammer like the football player he never could be, automatonically or otherwise, straight down into the hole in the table where it sparks on the concrete below before skittering to a metallic rest in the expanse of the shopping plaza, the incubated infant sitting on the pillow maybe giving the slight glimpse of a smile in its medicated, life-saved trance …

In a private room at the brothel, themed like a college slumber party, three automatons, with eyes completely unlike Mother and with eyes like Maria's, Diedre's, Hans Karl, with the body of his as it is now and hides in the shadows of his room and with his face the fusion of a guinea pig and his normal one, sits with the three model-perfect women he used his father's monthly allowance for SRY UR MOM DIED to pay for. However, even as they're dressed the same way he'd gotten used to in the videos – tight jersey shirts, knee high socks, their bodies smoother than 8000k – he keeps remembering those otherworldly whispers his mother told him:

You need to love REAL women … your father NEVER supported me … he was NEVER home …

Every sound in the room: the eastern inspired soundtrack from above, the meditative trance with breathing better than any ASMR chatroom on repeat, a playlist fit for EUPHORIC UNDERTAKINGS, the ticking of the heater in the walls, the buzzing of the lights, suddenly mixes with the paid-to-be-playful laughter of the bots being piloted from beyond the scope of his eyes. However, as they begin stroking him in the places that are now legal, all of it *perfectly okay*, he feels *nothing* towards them. He tries to tell himself *they're made for loving*, with the kissing and the GFE options proudly unselected seeing as he wants to be able to *fuck them like a real man*, but despite how they encircle him, how they contort, what is supposed to be happening is not happening, and the more he thinks about what should be happening, the less it happens: *he should've played ball, he should've saved his mother, he obviously didn't love any of them enough to keep them here* … no matter how they stroke, how they curve, how they attempt to *take his mind off whatever brought him here*, the unreality, the

feeling of the fullness at the base of his neck, continues to interject like freezing water from above, and then it starts, and then it stops, and then all he wants amidst their lilting smiles and robotic hahahahaha cadences, even as they begin 'loving' *each other*, is to find a way for it to work, to find a way to stay here forever, to disappear under the sheets and make himself one with the bed, one with the unreal, a being who can watch himself from above on the mirrors interlaid in the ceilings to find himself in a different place, forever, where his head is smooth and things make sense and his fucking mother is alive but placed on a different planet for saying *tongue would be over the line* during their *bonding* as a teenager, and -

TREATMENT RECOMMENDATIONS: KILL SELF

RingRingRingRing

"Oh, sweet Jesus, what now … come the fuck on, Duncan, stop chatting with the guy too much … hello, yes, is this Thomas?"

"Uhm … hi."

Braise sits straight up in his office chair, nearly disconnecting the Spectacle from the tangled wreath of wires with a whip and a snap. "Who is this?"

"Hans Karl Lieber. Is this Mr. Charlie at the Chocolate factory?"

"Yes," Braise says, pulling his chair in closer and slamming on a button to pop up the facsimile of the Psychological Correction office. "And who might I be speaking with?"

"I just told you, this is Hans Karl Lieber," the kid says, staring down at the hissing, steam pissing mesh of wires in the center of the carpeted floor. "Uhm … my *therapist* just *killed itself.*"

"Was this after a consciousness scan?" Braise asks, attempting to choke back a shrill, insane laugh of his own. "And do you know what *model* he was or … is, technically, still *is*?"

"He screamed something about the Ubermensch and then immediately committed a killcode," Hans Lieber says. "I found this number on his desk … I believe they call this unexpected *hallucination*."

"Right, because the robot drew some conclusion and decided that it made more sense to want to die in this sequence, so it skipped a step and went right to the conclusion." Braise says, planting his forehead on his own desk with a thump. "How nuts, am I right, Mr. Lieber: no matter how far advanced the technology gets, it *always* seems most confident when reporting on its *errors*!"

In the bowels of Euphoria, the place where all the fun shit might be digested the way shots leave the body, there's a level of access one has to pay to get to, or at least, in Sir Alexander's words, *be committed enough to get into*. I was half expecting a bright, hollow eyed automatron to whisk us down there in Members Only robes, but instead, after signing another piece of paper about being a guest for the day and *not to disclose the undisclosable*, we're now seated in leatherback chairs ripped straight from a dystopian children's movie: the air is filled with "scented smoke," because, as the people hooked up to these chairs might attest, there's ways to get high that don't involve the illicit consumption of substances. Imagine this, my slightly throbbing brain says to me, swimming in the green fairy: *plants illegal, implants encouraged*. The guys in their robes and with their midsections obscured by tables or the hot asses of automatronic maidens have had literal, actual metal implanted into their skulls, with wires connecting to their headsets and mixing their reality together like a rum and coke served with artisanal liquor, and now, with the "air effects" in full swing to give the smoker's lounge the right scent, are experiencing what its like on a strain by strain basis without *ever* injecting THC. Me? I've been high before, plenty of times, past usage forgiven and current usage unspoken, naturally, but these dudes are hooked up into realms of their own creation, the likes of which are completely kept under wraps better than Fort Knox if Fort Knox were run as a lunatic asylum. Sir Alex, for his part, has me seated down at a high top table, having put a robe on himself, with a chess board between us, him with the black pieces, me with the whites, and suggested we *blow off some steam* after the *high intensity* of watching him backhand the facsimile of a woman who I still love, and which if he'd done it in real life, he's saying, in *actuality*, I would've had the right to smack him or shoot him or "corporally violate his being."

"What setting do you have *yourself* hooked up to?" I ask him, taking the pawn in front of the king on the classical, wooden chessboard, with smooth pieces perfectly disinfected from the other pleasure sources, and placing it two squares in front.

"None," he says, taking the pawn in front of the queen and immediately challenging the center. "I have a medical card. But don't dodge the question, Duncan, tell me: what about what I did *wouldn't* make you want to hit me?"

I push the king pawn past the queen pawn, jokingly thinking that the strangest thing about the entire encounter has been me sitting here drunk off my ass playing chess while *investigating*. "See, Sir Alex, here's what I don't get: you're saying this is a place where *anything* goes, and now you're arguing that I *should* be mad at you?"

“Well, the question becomes are you angry with *me*, or are you looking for a way to exorcise your anger with *her* in a way society wouldn’t let you do, normally?” He moves his king pawn and blocks my advance, connecting his pawns in a diagonal.

“But you see, Sir, I don’t have fantasies about slapping my ex-wife.”

“You’re a better man than some of our clientele then, Mr. Chausser,” he says, hesitating between the right and the left side of the board before eventually moving his knight from the queen side in the classic L formation, mirroring a move I had half made while remembering no sound and the ragdoll physics of when he’d slapped the automatron. “If you could see the things I and the review team have seen from our patrons, I think you might choose a different path in life when it comes to human nature.”

I hesitate, pawn in my hand, the weed scent bringing back memories of cigarettes and cancer fears mixed with the idea somewhere else was possible before moving into that apartment. “How do you mean?”

“Do you really want to know about *how* violence is inherent to human nature?”

“My signature’s across the page already.” I say, keeping my attention focused on his steely blues while halfheartedly moving the queen pawn a single square up. At this, Sir Alex stands up, his bare feet on the carpet beneath us making two padded sounds, and he says, “allow us to pause for just a moment. Come with me.” I grab my drink, still a mix of the green shit cut with water after having sugar melted on a fork in front of my face with fire, and he shows me an alcove near the lounge center where the laughter of men and the echo of grunts swirl around us like an ocean of what people normally cannot do …

From above, the *DO NOTHING AND LOVE IT!* rooms are like a series of individualized pleasure pods: the shadows on the screen in front of us show men of different body sizes, but the largest percentage of them overweight, on satin covered pillows, man-cave recliners, and bean bag chairs befitting a college fraternity in different stages of “existence.” Their names are inscribed next to their vital signs blinking red, blue, green, as though this is a hospital for the damned, and the shadows pantomime their arms moving up and down rapidly in front of their midsections, the technology sending reports of what exactly their eyes are seeing, exactly what they’re doing: some of them are so fucked out on the drug settings – psychedelia, opiates, mescaline and Hunter Thompson’s digital spirit – that they’re in rooms with literal, actual padded walls, tripping in digital ways and meeting creatures from galaxies, Sir Alex says, that make them nearly unfit for modern society’s consumption after modern society deemed them *mass shooter types*. The DO NOTHING AND LOVE ITS as they’re called sit in these positions simply smiling at the ceiling, their bodily odors filtered

out system by system and replaced by either high tier cologne in a weighted, fruitish musk or the natural scents of evergreen forest clearings, and Sir Alex shows me the selection menu for when a womanly shadow either walks her way down from the cleaning and restocking bay at the center of the brothel OR, even more “exciting” for some of them, is created in the same way the one he slapped to perdition in front of me and *exorcised*. “I can’t show you what they see, or you’d lose faith in humanity altogether, with your predisposition towards ‘justice,’” he says, making air quotes at me as a chill runs across my shoulderblades at the sheer scale of what I’m seeing. “Out there, they’re obsolete, the dregs at the bottom of the bottle in a society that’s replaced them with automation, told them they need six packs that are unachievable, but in here, they’re the traveling professor fucking 400 students in ways that aren’t quite *real*.”

“But …” I ask him, turning from the computer wall in front of me with a perplexed look. “It’s *real* to them. It has *real* implications!”

“No more so than if they were to build a masturbation hovel in the basement of their homes, strap a headset over their eyes, and imagine they were always in a different spot than they truly are!” Sir Alex says, and my stomach does a summersault at his correctness. “They’re allowed to build entire fantasy worlds the likes of which would get them castrated by the eyes of pleasant, refined society, the people who replaced their livelihoods with unfeeling automatons. You can’t *imagine* how many of them spend their days slapping ragdolls of their ex wives, ex girlfriends, even their *mothers*. Here, look at this specimen,” he tells me, clapping a shadowed facsimile of a rotund man sitting upright in a recliner, his lower jaw moving and his fists clenched in front of him. “He sits there and just screams *fuck you, fuck you, fuck you* over and over again at a picture he imported of a woman who forgot him long ago, and his credit card *lives* in our system! If he did that in public, in front of his family, or even if he were overheard by a neighbor, they’d send him to an insane asylum just for *expressing* himself!”

“So if a tree lands in a forest and nobody hears it, it doesn’t make a sound?”

“On the contrary,” Sir Alex says, raising a ringed finger with a managerial smile at a deal being closed. “If these humans scream into the universe, someone’s finally *listening*.”

I exhale sharply, placing both my knuckles near the control board’s open space, enough to dodge any of the EMERGENCY SHUTDOWN buttons. The display flicks to another set of beds, these as though the men inside them – and a couple actual, *real* women! – are set up like beachgoers on reclining chairs, their faces pure ecstasy in a trancelike smile as automatrons walk amidst them in hooker-Hooter uniform combos, gold and purple, high heeled or barefoot, with burgers overflowing with grease and

cheese and meat and arterial destruction, steaks drenched in barbecue that would make Texas *swoon*, and desserts that honestly have me remembering a place called the Heart Attack Grill as Vegas finally birthed a child with the digital realm and we're all just swimming in the afterbirth, or some shit, as these men who, Sir Alex elucidates, were told they *are* nothing are finally enjoying *being* nothing. They eat, they masturbate, they control the controllable parts of their world, and he tells me, for the ones who are lower on money, their *likenesses* and their *minds* suffice as what amounts to a massive, metaphysical well of inspiration, information, and dedication to the idea that one doesn't have to just be obsolete and can still *live* in a society that thinks they're *dead!*

"All of that sounds well and good," I tell him, his religious fervor reflected on his brow's shine. "But you can't tell me any of this is *healthy*."

"*Healthy?*" Sir Alex repeats, his guffaws and the clap on the shoulder he gives me sounding louder in the small room. "Let me tell you a story, Duncan: I've been on the internet, like most of us, my entire life. And one of the stories I saw was the heroic story of how an entire fire company had to band their muscular arms together to save a man who ate himself into oblivion. He and his spouse at the time lived in a basement, right, and their idea of independence was to go to Wendy's, fill up an entire bag, eat the entire bag, and then drive to Burger King, do the same exact thing, and *then* attend a wedding so that they could place their folding chairs next to the orderves and stuff themselves until they were 400, 500 pounds, Duncan!" He says, the violent glee of what he's saying reflecting in his smile. "What would a man of upstanding moral character such as yourself suggest in such a situation, outlawing food?"

"People have the freedom to choose what they want."

"Indeed they *do*, Duncan, indeed they *do*, and do you know what happened to that man?" Sir Alex asks, clasping his hands behind his back. "He grew to over 600 pounds and found himself unable to climb the stairs from the basement, and in medical distress like a baby elephant in the Sahara at the age of 36, they needed to send the entire able bodied 20 man and woman fire department into his *basement*, along with a crane winch, and guide him up the stairs like a Pharoah of Fatness being extracted from his tomb after improper burial! So the man realizes, of course, that his life was nearly drowned in his own decisions, entirely legally, and he gets one of those surgeries readily available to reduce one's stomach since one's mind can't do it, and he ends up losing what, 250, 300 pounds? And you're going to be the man to tell him, after all of that, when he nearly kills himself on the fat of the land, that he can't come here and smack some robots because the weed he wanted to smoke is obviously the most dangerous thing about his life?"

“No, I’m not that man, but I’m trying to find the *balance*.”

“I implore you,” Sir Alex says, raising his hands to the ceiling, open palmed. “If we can’t have enough sense to admit that prostitution is the world’s oldest profession, if we can’t have enough enlightenment as a species to recognize the inevitability of human nature, at least don’t point your guns at the people trying their damndest to *regulate* and have the whole thing happen in a safe environment when him, him, him, her, and him, and *especially that guy*,” he says, pointing at the shadows on the control board in a sequence befitting a laser’s accuracy scanning a product. “*All* voluntarily chose to give their savings, their likenesses, into a place where, in a world where they *never* could rise to the level of a CEO, a Prince, a Queen, they can at least have the ability to do so in a way that’s real to *them*. Give them at least that sliver of human grace, won’t you, good sir?”

I reach down to my pocket, tapping my own wallet, when the emptiness of my robed pockets makes me realize *my phone is still on the table*. Telling Sir Alex this, and allowing the muted moans and movement of shadows on the wall to be some silent, damned chorus behind me, he leads me back to the chessboard where, upon picking up my device, I notice six, seven missed calls from Braise’s number. As Sir Alex contemplates the chess board, eventually deciding to move the kingside bishop and *checking* my king, I read the text message that makes my heart do a suicidal plunge into my ribcage: HKL MOVING TO E, HKL MOVING TO E, FAST

“I need to pause our game momentarily,” I tell Sir Alex, wiping the notification away. “My partner and I need to have a conversation.”

“We can check and see if he’s had his fun, yet,” Sir Alex says, politely stepping back from the board. “Say, you haven’t used *any* of your six automatrons which you bought with your package, have you?”

“We’ve got all day,” I tell him, shjfting between the men who are in their own games of cards and billiards and foosball as though any one of them could be a near-postal teenager about to rise in his fantasies up the ladder of imagination faster than a rocket while blowing our whole investigation to *shit*. “I’m going to take a few minutes to contemplate existence at the bar upstairs. You’ve definitely got me in this game,” I tell him, extending my palm.

“Now, now, Duncan, as you said, it’s still early!” He gestures the board, shakes my hand, and then, as I try to make it look like I’m not racing up the stairs past the slot machines, he calls, “Oh, Duncan, one more thing,”

“Yes, Sir Alex?”

“Don’t allow your idea of morals to overwrite our human truths,” he says. “Nobody’s gonna judge if you rail out the tattooed brunette!”

“Noted,” I tell him, and then, shaking off the technological hallucinations one more mind like trying to blind the eye staring into my soul, I race up the stairs, already dialing Leo and ready to spike the phone in the floor as it goes right to voicemail …

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This motherfucker not answering his phone might get us both killed if that kid wanders in here ready to bone and finds the same two dudes who interrogated him and his father at his home in his safe space brothel, and the issue is that, in addition to what Rajesh and Sir Alex showed me, there’s an entire other *floor* to this place that Montserrat is apparently *inside*. According to this, as the dead eyed, bright irises of the automatronic women standing at this section like naughty referee doorguards tells me, he’s inside the *CARNAVAL DESIRES SECTION*, which is cordoned off like a high-class nightclub with a leather rope and the doorguards being selectable for carnality, as the marketing might say, and after explaining to them I’m looking for a friend and turning down their dual offer to be my friend for as *long as I want*, I manage to, still wearing my robe and slippers as provided by management for lounging, which gets an excited, squeaky kick from the partiers in their tight dresses, collared shirts, fancy slacks at my *lack of giving a shit*, lose myself in a crowd of twenty somethings who would be candy flipping and grinding ‘til the early morning hours in a place where this happened *naturally*. There are *so* many more bodies here than I expected of different skin tones, and the issue is that, as the techno beat from the raised platform and the smoke controlling, hanger-esque DJ in the rabbit hat blares in my eardrums and makes me feel like I’m climbing altitude on a flight with how hard its pulsing, Montserrat could literally be *anywhere* hear. I’m grabbing the shoulders and skirting the hips of every slick-back haired or bald headed, smooth moved dude looking for my partner who totally has used *every bit* of the *gratis* at this instant, and as the DJ on the stage has lights behind him explode in a rainbow of colors and neon twirling jacked from Cirquis de Solei in hell that screams, in bold, CLUB E U P H O R I A, causing everyone to go *woo* where the metal and the flesh are one and the same at this level of sweat, degree of heat, I give a half-hearted *woo* of my own while pushing my way towards the bar, where some of the automatrons – freshly washed, perfumed, ready for service perpetually – spin the ice in their motor oil rocket fuel alcoholic drinks and take my panting and perspiration to mean they don’t have to flank me too fast until I recharge. This time, the bartender’s a light haired, blue eyed dude who is probably, mostly real considering the fact it’s a menial labor job, and between shaking a contraption that looks like a space capsule used to make gimlets and bopping his head to the beats pulsing through my

muscles like a muted siren, he leans in as I try to shout at him, “HAVE YOU SEEN MY FRIEND LEONARDO?”

“WHAT?”

“HAVE YOU *SEEN*,” I say, leaning into the bar and trying not to appear manic. “MY *FRIEND* LEE-OH-NARD-OH?”

“WHICH ONE OF THEM IS THAT?” he scream-asks, turning to the nearest automatron built to look like a cross between Taylor Momsen and Gigi Hadid, who shrugs and says back something like *I could be Leonardo!*

“NO,” I tell him. “He’s a REAL man who is about six foot high,” I raise my hand above my head. “Smells vaguely of smoke and expensive cologne.”

“Boy, that *really* narrows it down,” the bartender says, clapping the bottom of the shaker on the granite countertop and pouring the gimlet for the adjacent automatron. “You seem stressed, reveler, you should allow Matilda to ease your worries.”

The automatron, with her necklace already dangling between her perfectly angular breasts at a level of the golden ratio inspired by the greatest sculptors of the past hijacked for use in whatever fallen realm of humanity this turns out to be, winks at me while stirring, and I lean into the bartender again while shaking my head and say, “My friend has already probably used all his *credits*.”

“You seem *real* concerned about this guy,” the bartender says, raising an eyebrow. “You *do* know we have a section for discerning ladies and gentlemen alike, don’t you?” He points at an access point to the MALE AUTOMATRON section lit up in neon blue and separated by a curtain, but before I can pound my fist on the bar or kick the stool, a range of fireworks pop off in the direction of the stage and everybody *woos* again like the rabbit headed DJ is the conductor of their white hot joy. Then, at the other end of the bar, there’s a crowd of people clapping around a section of the countertop curved out like an *S*, and the automatron who was eyeing me pivots in her chair before putting her high-heels on the ground and swirling. My blood stops in my veins. My heart skips a beat. In a semi-circle around a barstool bedecked with the nailed hands of automatrons in whites, blues, reds, oranges, pinks, like he’s the birthday kid ready to eat his cake in front of the whole universe, decked in the same style of hat that Sir Alex wore earlier and in a puffy jacket straight out of *Pimp My Universe* sits the very subject that caused his robotic therapist to kill itself, himself, and I thank the bartender hurridly while the automatron who was eyeing me saunters her way over and plants himself right in his young-man lap, as I blindly push through the maddening crowd, whip my way across the stairs, and stumble my way into another themed room with my blood pressure so high it might get me methalized if we make our way out of here alive …

Truthfully, the only time I'd ever done psychedelics was in undergraduate: I stood in the center of an urban garden in Baltimore and heard the street lamps from downtown buzzing, car horns honking in an endless way, my teeth chittering due to the ice I was crunching on from the drink I finished, but the absinthe and the adrenaline making a typhoon in my veins combined with the sprawling what the fuckery of what's in front of me has me wondering if there wasn't anything *extra* extra in that shit: there's a *cheerleader* section, a *soccer girl* section, a *EuphoriU* section with only the finest Co-eds money could buy and legality provide, and the amusement park level revelry of the men frequenting this place and being pampered like the MVP quarterback by these modelesque furies has me asking whether or not I've wandered into a porn set and am going to be forced to score a touchdown with a tight end before getting booted from this place. And there, in the center of a couch in front of a wall-sized, sports themed television showing the highlights from Automaton League games where the robots hurtle through the air like Madden players on speed, with a brunette, barely covered cheerleader on his left side in the White and Red and Navy euphoria colors, and with a naughty football player on his right with her knee highs draped over his nether regions, with a goblet in his hand and what's probably a vaporizer in the other, with his dress shirt practically ripped off his front, soccer shorts on his bottom, and what look like *custom cleats* on his feet with the EU logo, sits my partner, who is nose to nose with the youngish looking cheerleader with the unrealistic chest and the curly dark hair in such a trance that he doesn't even notice me waltz my way into the display and catch the two 'women' like I'm a fish wandering into a lure.

I cough twice, respectfully holding my hands behind me back, and Leo breaks his trance enough, the scent of whatever he's done, what's still to be done reaching me from his barely covered shoulders, and he shouts, "Heyyyyyy Duncan!" at me before I can try and shush him. The college aged, emerald eyed automatron in the soccer jersey and the *thong*, it turns out, detaches from the right side of my partner and clears space for me on the couch with a *come hither* gesture and flick of her hair and when I try to resist, Leo tells me it would be rude to refuse, and that they've already *hooked him for a BIG package*, causing the two automatrons to giggle, and then, despite myself, I'm now sitting on the plush cushions with enough

space between me and Leo for the soccer girl automatron, with her number 6 in her silken jersey, to slide her way across my lap and ask me what brings *me* to the place where *every dream is possible*?

"I needed to get out more," I tell her, as she looks at me with a face stolen from the cover of Vogue and triggering a part of me I can't seem to quite reason away. "Have you been having fun?"

"*So* much fun," the other automatron says, moving to sit in Leo's lap with her skirt barely covering what jiggles in Leo's hands. He claps it, and she laughs while making an exhale straight from VR porn, and Leo says, "I'm completely fucking *broke!*"

"What did you *do?*" I ask him.

"I used the company card."

"You *what*?"

"Remember?" He asks me, wrapping his arm around the automatron beholding the touchdowns and sacks and takeaways on the big screens. "And … they offered me a two for one, so I went two for each."

"He's recharging," the surrealistic, bought and sold vixen in my lap says to me while draping her arms around my neck. "You're dressed like you spent a good amount of time in the Do Nothing lounge."

"My jersey got lost in the mail," I say, turning back to Leo. "I'm actually just here to retrieve my partner, seeing as we *are* on a bit of a schedule."

"Como?" Leo asks, as the automatron in his lap turns towards me with an open mouth and a battering of her eyelids, with the one in my lap actually stiffening up worse than what I'd already gotten to thanks to her unreal ass pressed right into me.

"A *schedule*?" The one in my lap asks, incredulous. "You mean you still believe in *time*?"

"Unfortunately," I say, politely with my hands around her pro-player-level abs as she adjust herself in the *right* direction on top of me. "We've been here so long we've probably drained our company's bank accounts."

"They'll pay for more," she says, leaning in to run her nose and breath right by my collarbone. "And besides, according to the records, you haven't been with *any body* yet, so it would probably only take what, a *few minutes*?"

The other automatron laughs as Leo continues to rest his cheek against the side of her shoulder, with the one in my lap ready to whisk me away so far past the point of caring, its hard for me to say *no* in more ways than just one. Besides, we've already had a therapist commit suicide, our cards be overcharged, and there seems to be no legal way to stop whatever is happening here, so even if the kid *does* see us, what's the worst that could happen? Men are men, aren't we, my alcohol-drenched psyche argues

as the olive skinned automatron straddles me, staring right into my soul with eyes painted to say there's *something there* in a way my brain can't decipher as being untrue. If my ex-wife saw me doing this, a voice inside me says, she'd chop off the finger that bore that ring, but I say, "Alright, I'll do *one trip* upstairs, but after that, Leo, we really need to go."

"Si," Leo says. "And *you* really need to *come*!"

This causes both automatrons to laugh in a way that rings genuine, as the one in my lap, Natale, tells me we could even *go for four* as Leo *went for two*, assuring me she visited the cleaning section and was totally outfitted like someone *brand new*, and as my phone's messages from braise display like unopened letters rotting in a mailbox, my justification is that this is the fastest way to remove us from the situation so we can regroup, refocus, and, my god, there's a war happening inside of me as Natale leads me through the crowd by my hand, checks in at the sports bar, tells the bartender I'm *finally using one of my credits* to the open envy of both the other men seated around the bar in their jerseys and football pads and to the other automatrons whistling, their eyes darting at me and asking, in a way almost *too* human, *why her and not me for a man as frugal as you*, but to fully understand this realm and how it works, Natale leads me out the door, up the stairs, and selects a room, to my choosing, that is meant to resemble a bedroom fit for an Emperor, a King, and before I can even say no, I'm directed to another shower where the floor tiles are heated, the uniform (silken robe to then be replaced by the dress attire I wore, seeing as we're on our way skyward after this one for Braise to smack us down) clean as the whistle between the female ref's lips, and I wash away the sinking feeling we've crossed a point of no return down the drain, my phone silent, my body guiding my tired, headache laden brain …

-25-

She leads me up a spiral staircase, past a console which logs the fact I'm using the first of my bot-purchases to do this, whatever *this* is, and I feel as though I'm a college freshman who is about to get booted from his university dorm for playing league of legends instead of going to class who killed themselves, died, went to heaven. This woman's body is *perfect*, as if she's been airbrushed in real life, her angles perfectly curved by the hands of a strange god who finally decided the fallen world could reach perfection if they paid for it. The carpets are lush, her feet making skin-exact replications of padding across the carpet, like we're absconders at a slumber party, and when she unlocks the room, slides the tumbler back, directs me inside, and winks at me with nary a blip of her eyelid or a click of anything animatronic, the guilt, red hot, seeps into my neck along with the burst of air acclimating me to the *Emperor's suite*.

“Am I paying more for this?” I ask her, clearing my throat slightly, as she closes and puts a EUPHORIA IN PROGRESS slider across the front of it, folding her foot on the carpet and wiggling her ass slightly while looking behind her with a sly grimace.

“It’s *all inclusive*,” she says, placing her hands on her hips and getting close enough to me so that when I look into her wet emerald eyes, the animal lust is already rising underneath my better judgment.

“This looks like a room fit for an Emperor,” I say, as she laughs and steps even closer to me, some sort of lilac perfume intoxicating me worse than the hallucinogenic juice Sir Alex poured.

“They must’ve upgraded your *package*,” she says, bumping her hip right into my midsection and getting a slight exhalation from me despite the fact I feel like *I can never go in public again after what I’ve done here*. “Do you want to take a shower?”

The bathroom next to us is a series of linoleum tiles and fixtures made to look like fountainheads from the Roman times. “I can join you, if you want,” she says, running her finger up my dress shirt. I tell her I need a moment to adjust to the atmosphere, *a peasant like me doesn’t get out much*, and she winks at me and says that she’ll be *waiting on the bed* as she goes for the soundsystem controls, handing me a silken towel from the screen stand in front of her before going to recline on the half-crescent shaped bed outfitted with regalia made to either make the drapes in a palace or dress the people who live in it. I enter the bathroom, the pallid lights twinkling like stars fixed in the atmosphere stolen from space and hammered there, and I slap my face with the warm water after allowing the faucet to run openly from the silver and gold sun-shaped taps. I slap myself on the right cheek, then the left, lightly, as if I’d shaved, looking in the mirror at the blurry at the edges, five o’clock shadowed, sunken eyed man who has had headset after drug-like experience rapid fired over his lids in the past two weeks, and all I really want is somewhere out there in a world that isn’t feeling any *realer* than the one I’m in now, but even as the soft, harpsicord music begins to make me feel as though I’ve entered nirvana on a wrong turn off the highway, the entire thing feels like I’ve stolen from someone else when I suppose the minuses on the company bank account might mean they’re stealing from *me*. All I can think about, as I put the water on from the gilded spigot and sink my naked body into the warm water, the grime from running around this place and the fuzzies from my socks sinking into the rising, basin locked tide, is my wife’s touch. They could build a series of beauties ready to tear down Olympus worse than the Amazons on strike, but whatever’s about to happen in this bedroom, in this place, is not the same thing as what happened before I moved into that shitty apartment and I took this fucking job where my brain decided to

serve some higher purpose, lost to me amidst the steam, diving into the depths of reality and tripping on a fault line in a way where my half-drunk, half-exhausted ass wants to allow the warmth of the tile behind me and the water around my body to carry me into slumber and I'll wake up in a countryside with a plush bed and someone who feels like they want to be there for something other than what's in my wallet. Apparently, as the automatron raps on the door with a singsongy *Duncan, are you enjoying your bath?*, a man can dream while dreaming, doesn't the average person *know*, and, after pretending I can't hear her the first time and taking a mammoth sigh under the suds, she raps again, I kill the tap, and say, *coming, my darling*, and she says *not yet, I hope!* as I dry myself off, wrap the towel around me, steel myself, and unlock the door.

Holy fucking shit.

She's taken off her sports Jersey and wiped herself down using what must be water from the fountain in front of the window, wearing nothing but a red top that matches her bottoms that she enticed Leo and myself with, and her abs are so fit she could be modeled after a professional footballer from a country far away. Her eyes switch on when she sees me shirtless, and she whistles a bit at my mid-30s flab and traces my right pec in a way that makes me, despite what I was feeling, automatically responsive to her ellipticals in the way a machine codes itself nowadays. Input, output, result. "You're so *clean*," she says, turning the finger into a tanned palm that causes my blood to chase the surface worse than a diver looking for air. "And I can *guarantee* that I'm as good as *new* for you in compliance with *all* the cleanliness ordinances!"

If she were a flesh and blood woman, that would turn me off, but the idea of being lost in the cookie jar and eating my way out takes over, and I allow her to guide me to the bed, placing my now bare ass down on the sheets, and when she takes me into her mouth, I lean back with my arms behind my head and stare up at the mirror-covered ceiling, watching as her hair bobs and bobs and feeling the most realistic thing I have in months upon months in a way that begins, continues, and will end (shortly, *fuck*) far past the hijacking of memory as portrayed by Gerald Lieber. I close my eyes, tense my hips, imagine the entire bed is burning, that somehow in the hell I believed in as a child where the bad kids went and the good parents who lied to their kids never ventured, we're doing this exact same thing, and I can practically *smell* the bed burning as I look into her moon shining through the light reflected off the trees gaze plus the way her body curves downwards in the mirror, the familiar stranger in his own ecstasy someone who I might've known, and when she runs her nails up my legs and looks right at me is when I can't control gravity any longer and let out a sound of pure exhalation, an exorcism in its own right, before she swallows easily,

stands up, rubs her lips, and says, “Congratulations on achieving your first Euphoria! Do you want to go *again*?”

I don’t answer. Instead, I stare into the blackness behind my eyes as she nestles up to me, her movements only slightly jerky in the way a beat only a fraction of a second off beat would be in editing, and when I look down at her always-ready, expectant eyes, not a hint of tiredness in her gaze since it’s impossible, right, I ask her, “So, like … where does it *go* when the man is *done*?”

“That’s classified, but it gets removed!” She says, with a clean smile, and suddenly my stomach lurches, my eyes close, and I tell her I may need to take another shower thanks to the sweat under my arms and the pure, hot shame running somewhere inside of me from a beginning to a destination known as *checking my account after this* …

I stagger a bit after my clothes are back on, with perfume and cologne having been daintily applied by her only making me sneeze once; the debate ping pongs around my head: *is it sex or masturbation, sex or masturbation*? Technically, one side of me says, since *she* is not a *person*, “she” is a *robot*, right, an android, an automatron, 0% person, 100% woman, as the marketing tagline goes, I just paid a down payment on a car, practically, in order to “have sex” with the most realistic masturbation portal ever crafted by a lonely man’s hands. This is basically the live-action version of waifus. *This* is what China, Japan were afraid of with their young men, *this* is how the Russians won control over the planet, etcetera, but that begs the question: is this *woman*, this *automaton*, with the dainty smile and the pornstar ass and the modelesque, unblemished, unbruised body, does *she* know what *she* is? If I were to kick her, or ‘it,’ down the spiral staircase, and she or her or it or me or us or WHAT were to short a circuit, cross a wire, snap a metal (?) joint, would that be something she knows? I want to turn her around and do the pillow talk out here: *do you feel pain? Do you have thoughts inside of that skull of yours? Did someone steal some memories like they stole my fucking wife and plant dreams that weren’t your own inside your circuitry, darling?*

But, instead of asking that, as she punches numbers into the console and updates whatever record I have, whatever artificial wetness and the part of me she sucked out somehow aerating themselves before her *trip to the cleaning station*, where I’m assuming a team of people in lab coats harvest my DNA or some other paranoid batshittery, I regard her in the same way I did the blue eyed, “perfectly breedable” metaversal contraption I engaged with in Mr. Lieber’s realm that couldn’t even get me hard: they’re walking and talking, dancing and stripping, flirting and grinding and grabbing and ‘breathing’ on all these gentlemen here, and it might as well be a ghost turned into the flesh taking all my loneliness in a way that is felt

but does not feel, and in a way that *is* but is *not quite real*, that's what my exhausted, tired, wrung out brain says, and when she directs me down the staircase, I tell her to wait a moment, because, of course, behind me, to complete the meme and the dreams of a man who I wanted to kill for hijacking my wife's memories, harvested from my brain the same way my cum was just harvested from my cock except not re-sold in this second instance in the same way, is the spitting image of the older man himself on the hooked arm of the same Tayler-Bot, spelled *that* way, who kisses the high booted, tight black dress, slick black hair and vampiric skin of his automatron and then is eye level with me at the top of the landing in a way I don't even give a fuck to dodge in his half-crooked fedora and his gentleman's robes, the exact spitting image opposite in a place where the only thing I could've written him up for violating is the tobacco smoking ordinance if they didn't have a strict-ass policy of following the fucking laws.

Fuck it.

"Oh my goodness," I say, my automatron pausing on the stairs with a happy little :o face to mimic me, trace my soul. "Is that the one and only mister Hans Karl Lieber?"

"Yes sir!" The kid says, his flat affect turning towards me in a smile as he reaches out his hand-sanitized palm. I grip it. "So you guys decided to see the light, finally!"

"Something like that," I say, knowing Braise is either losing his mind or strapped in with a bowl of popcorn to see what kind of shit gets caused. "This is the place you said you frequented."

"I've had a strange day. Tayler will tell you," he says, as the familiar automatron, who could've been told to act that way on the command someone would use for a circus animal doing tricks, floats next to him and engages a tongue-out smile with the one whose name I forgot and who will forget me with the whisk of a brush, presumably, in the next fifteen minutes.

"His *therapist* committed *suicide*," Tayler says, and this brings a smirk and a couple short laughs from the kid, the part of his head messed up from that accident covered by the fedora perfectly. My eyes widen in shock, and I whistle through my lips, the distance between what I know and what he thinks I know the thinness of my phone's black screen in my pocket.

"I'm sorry for your loss," I tell him.

"Meh, you knew him, he was that bot that showed up with you guys to my dad's house," Hans Karl says, going back to that steely, lip-locked grimace. Below, Montserrat has noticed that we're talking, and he keeps his eyes locked on the Premier League replays on the soccer channel, the cheerleader next to him on a strange public double date where her man's

got an upset stomach all of a sudden. “This really makes my dad’s wonderland look like a piece of shit, doesn’t it?”

“Well, I’d say each has their advantages,” I tell him, resting my hand on the railing, my cool training kicking in and lowering my blood pressure to where it’s only threatening to pop my veins versus stop my heart. I point at the automatron next to him. “Seems like you’re pretty familiar, here.”

“Well, you gotta pick the right ones,” Hans Karl says, his voice echoing in a way I don’t think he knows how to control, like a brick footed motorist on the gas. “You know the thing about my father’s virtual world, right?”

“What’s that?” I ask him.

“Some of those ‘women,’” he air quotes. “Are piloted by *outsourced companies*.”

Leo’d been listening on a discreet earpiece via my phone, and at that, he stands up downstairs like a record scratching, sending a bowl of food he’d been munching on for gameday falling in a nacho cheese waterfall to the carpet. I swallow.

“What do you mean, son?”

“I mean, my father’s a fuckin’ cheapskate,” he tells me, wrapping his arm around Tayler and poking the side of her head, causing her to giggle. “All of this programming by Sir Alex is adiabatic: you know, *insulated, real*. My father? That guy has *dudes* running his *women*!”

Leo is now on all fours on the couch, asking the boppy cheerleader for a wastebucket, and I swallow with a narrowing of my eyes. “So, I take it you aren’t a fan of your father’s services?”

“Legally, it’s all real, and don’t get me wrong, the guys do a great job impersonating them, but you gotta think: you’re paying a subscription in his world, with his hijacking, his impersonating of reality, and you think you’re having a virtual night with a lovely woman when in reality it’s probably Rajesh behind an iphone screen!”

Montserrat vomits into the trashcan so hard that the earpiece nearly disconnects along with his phone, blaring ‘music’ to make it seem as though that’s what he’s doing, and he slaps the side of the couch worse than he must’ve in the room as I pretend I’m floating above myself.

“Not *literally* Rajesh,” Hans Karl says, chuckling at my partner down below. “But yeah, if you guys came here looking at Sir Alex as the villain or the actual, automatronic women, emphasis on the women, invested in by society, then you probably hate what my father’s doing for those who can’t afford to live the real thing as much I do.” He pauses, and a chill does indeed find its way down my shoulders like the negative version of what the automatron did to me in that room when I finished my business, which is

what he's talking now, too. *Evidence of wanting to tear something down, indignation at wanting to do something else*.

"Would you be interested in getting evaluated by a human therapist, Hans Karl?" I ask him, genuine sympathy sinking through the filth of my own skin, which I'd want to tear apart with a straight razor like a depressed teenager if I weren't in public. "You've obviously dealt with a lot of shit."

"Eh," he says, shrugging his shoulders. "If you think it'll help Sir Alex. He and my father really don't get along, you know."

I nod my head, jigsaw pieces falling in my brain like numbers in a sequence coming together in ways far beyond what I can tell.

"For example," Hans Karl says. "The version of my mom that he has? Totally fake, completely unreal. But the one that Sir *Alex* built for me," Hans Karl says, and my eyes go shock white and wide. "*She's* the *real* one."

"And where exactly is she?" I ask.

"You'd have to get initiated," he tells me, and the automatron next to him puts her hands over her mouth in a *ha-ha* way.

"*Duncan*," Montserrat says from below, calling up the stairs, the guys around us pausing with the women in their laps trying to grind them away from the reeking smell of vomit from Leo's mouth. "We need to *go*."

I nod, extending my hand again. "It would seem as though my friend has fallen a bit ill, but I may just take you up on that."

"It's how to live *forever*, Mr. Chausser," Hans Karl says, a gleam in his eyes human, real, what the others have been trying to impersonate. "And it makes my father look like a *kindergartner*."

I shake his hand, give a short wave to the automatron, and when I descend the stairs, I can't shake the idea of the kid's mother, wherever she was and wherever she's been after it ends, if there's such a thing, returned to earth in a way her son knows and which Braise, as he confirms in my ear, says we must understand, because behind the excitement, the most-likely-fucked-up-underage in an unprovable way, that glow, that ecstasy, something sinister skirts the room exactly like the acidic smell will until its filtered and replaced by the synthetic roses circulating in this place where death itself seems a faraway uncertainty versus the cruel truth that happens when one unplugs the cords …

ACT III: “REAL” EXISTENCE!!!!

26:

SUBJECT: LIEBER, HANS KARL
EVALUATOR: STONE, CHRISTINA B. (AMT) w/ BRAISE, NATHAN L
METHOD: CEREBRAL SCREEN W/ANIMATE
PURPOSE: Find and correct sentiment toward violent, potential patricide; evaluate and discuss reasons for feeling, find/correct root cause while treating symptom.
BEGIN SCREENING:

In his guinea pig form, Hans Karl Lieber, with his age, 18, pinned to his chest, his hairy form pressed into a suit with a briefcase in his clawed hand and his feetsies in dress shoes which allow the nails to poke out the front, has copies of his resume clutched to his chest with his talons as he approaches the REAL WORLD JOB FAIR. Even in this vision, the fur on the right side of his head is matted, distancing him from the other, normal humans, dressed in their blazers and pantsuits, three pieces and woven jackets, less because he’s a person-sized guinea pig and more because he’s got a strange head. Despite this, the headhunters, seated behind tables for each major – ECONOMICS, POLITICS, COMMUNICATIONS, GED’s, HS DIPLOMAS ONLY divided into MENIAL LABOR, RETAIL SALES, FAST FOOD, GRUNT WORK – divided by columns underneath the hazy, sunless atmosphere, almost like god smoked that morning and put them into the sky with no room, eagerly await as each potential employee walks their way into the chairs. But you see, these headhunters are dressed a bit differently: rather than mimicking the professional attire suited (heh) for LinkedIn, they’re dressed in grim reaper robes, multi-colored: some are ruby red, others sapphire blue, as if they melted the precious metals and gemstones of the earth and threw them on for a rave, with each holding a gemstone crafted scythe that doubles as a ballpoint-esque highlighter or sharp tipped pen to highlight different parts of the resume. PIGGUMS LIEBER, as his nametag displays, sniffs the polluted air the way he might if he were driving behind a diesel truck, and the cold sweat of his armpits is thankfully protected by his matted fur and could be mistaken for post-shower water versus anxious perspiration. Finally, he gets to the end of the NO DEGREE line, at least that’s how *he* reads it, aside from his high school diploma, and he sits in front of a grim reaper with a shadowed face behind the almost lemonade-esque stand, with the rest of the crowd far enough away for their consultation to be considered *free and confidential*.

The grim reaper rises from his seat, the smoke billowing out of his hood nothing compared to his sturdy, bony, black gloves, and in a voice that sounds like a normal, adult male’s piped through a microphone – unremarkable, *normal* as can be – the headhunter says, “Would you prefer

to be addressed as Hans Karl or… Piggums?" He sits back down with a copy of Hans Karl's resume in his hands, and Piggums sets the briefcase down next to him, extending his arms to the sides and using his open paws and :I face to give the air of unaffected, complete professionality.

"Piggums needs job!" He says, as the HeadHunter holds the resume closer to his face. If he had eyes, they'd be squinting.

"I'm aware, Mr. Lieber … its just that, if you want to be hired, you've got a few things working against you." The HeadHunter says, tapping his scythe on his crossed legs underneath his black-tie worthy robe. "First of all, I'm going to cut straight to the point: you have no work experience aside from volunteering as a farmhand, according to this. And your grades your senior year, despite being the class president and involved in this … what was it, 'technology' team? Metaversal robotics?"

"Ennnnnnyhhhh."

"Right, so you have no experience for which you've gotten paid."

"Piggums worked for free."

The HeadHunter sighs, placing two gloved fingers in the space where the bridge of his nose would be, before creaking his office chair, planted in the middle of the concrete plateau, backwards so hard it rolls a little across the jagged ground. "Mr. Lieber, you don't *work* for free, you work to *be* free. Do you understand?"

"Ennnnnnyh."

"Look around you," he says, pointing to the people at the job fair: they're all shaking hands and swapping work stories, enjoying the free ordeurves they got with their higher ticket prices, listening to "career success stories" from people who, according to the conference schedule, were quite successful both in their academic pursuits and in their professional endeavors. "Those people even had jobs reach out to *them*," the HeadHunter says, pointing at a line of people on the brochure with the "Pros" listed by their ranked, college GPAs.

"Piggums wants to know how much money they make."

"Gah," The HeadHunter says, tossing the resume aside. "There are three questions you never want to ask in employment: first, can a robot do my job better – thus why you don't see a whole lot of scientists in this brochure anymore, and why I'm honestly unimpressed by your metaversal proclamations – second, how much can I get paid for it, because there's *always* a way to cut the cost, and last, due to your decorum, surprising, seeing as your father's quite well known, I'm half expecting you to ask me if you can get a *paid* internship." The HeadHunter slaps the brochure again. "These people got *their* internships helping our automatrons learn how to code genetics, learn how to write, how to properly analyze legal attire to make it stupid enough so our humans could still catch up. Heck, we even

had a group of financial advisors volunteer to teach the automatrons how to pick clients up at *bars!* What skills do you bring to the table, Mr. Lieber, aside from your family name?"

"Piggums makes art."

"Oh, boy, we've got another 'Germanic artist," the HeadHunter says, clipping his booted feet on the bottom of the table as he air quotes it. "What kind of art do you make?"

"Piggums makes stories in the metaverse."

"So you're a … metaversal storyteller? Don't tell me you tried programming," he says, folding his gloved hands on the table. "Your father never would've had you pursue a *dead* career."

"Ennnnnnnyhhhh," Piggums says, in the negative tonation. Meanwhile, someone in the FAST FOOD line is jumping up and down: their college degree in fine arts has demonstrated their communication skills enough to have them be a *manager* at *McDicks!* According to the HeadHunter, as he implores Hans Karl to look around, *everyone* is having *fun* but *you*! "I'm not sure what old films you've been watching, dear young professional," the HeadHunter says. "But we need to see exactly how you can mimic the automatons, or at least *give* them something." He reaches into the desk drawer and opens and closes it with a quick slam. "Here," the HeadHunter says. "How good are you at hammering round pegs into round holes? And how fast can you do it?"

Hans Karl takes the block set and quickly arranges them into a repeatable pattern in the wooden center, leaving the triangle untouched and the rectangle not filled.

"Excellent," the HeadHunter says, taking the device back. "It's as simple as that: there's no point in being an artist or a writer nowadays when the *robots* do it all. And by the way, what's this gap here in your resume following high school?"

"Piggums mom died," The guinea pig person says.

"Unfortunate," The HeadHunter says. "Well, as you know, there are plenty of options for reanimation when engaged in the proper moral context. For you, what I suggest is that you submit an application at your local supermarket or your local drugstore or your local fast food restaurant, seeing as your plans not involving college are going to make you a less desirable candidate for management in those industries." The HeadHunter clicks a bell on the side of the disk with a ringing chime, and Piggums shakes his hand with one of his slick, black gloves, before going, "Or, of course, you can join your father's enterprise! His business surely has been *soaring* recently!"

Piggums nods, furrowing his eyebrows and the place underneath his eyes, remembering when his father would come home late from his office

job prior to *reskilling and expanding*, and with a pleasant smile forced worse than a pellet out his nether regions or a kidney stone, basically, he picks up his briefcase, filled with nothing but air, and trundles back down the path away from shouts of glory …

V^V^V^V^V^V^V^V^V^V^V^V^V^V^

It's dinnertime at the Lieber household. Mr. Lieber went to work, came home, made a huge, steaming vat of spaghetti with meat sauce, as Mrs. Lieber, still smoking out of the window fan, sits across the table with nary a word. The evening sunlight has collapsed into the skyline to meld with the ashen blue of near snow. They chew in silence, with guinea pig Hans Karl looking closer to a real human, basically with just tufts of hair on the side of his chin. His parents, meanwhile, have said absolutely nothing the entire time; his father's been living upstairs, sleeping on a spare mattress, and his mother's staking of the bedroom has been completely on her own accord, to the point where even the *cigarette boxes* have moved halfway in there from the window. After eating only half a meatball, dressed in her traditional, revealing flannel shirt with the tank top underneath it, Mrs. Lieber scrapes her fork across the plate like a record scratch across porcelain and *belches*, the rancid smell of it mixing with her tobacco breath and drifting towards Hans Karl who, despite the pounding in his head from the anxiety and awareness of every iota on his parents – his father's half-shaven beard, his mother's shaky way she picks her fork up – continues shoveling the food into his mouth. The MiracleLax they gave him to help with the blood in his shit has been only slightly mixed into his milk glass, with the automatonic doctor telling him, once his triglycerides hit 400, that they needed to adjust the diet just a tad. He tried smoking one or two of his mother's cigarettes, only to discover something else must be keeping her skinny, and the clumpy, powdery substance in his mouth has an acrid taste to it as he swallows the milk whole before using a plastic straw from beside the dining room table to push the remnants of it around like dandruff or lice mixed with runny, watered down shampoo. Then, as his mother starts in on his father about *why aren't you eating, did you stop on the way home* and starts barking at him for *buying the pretzel on the way back without asking permission*, or some stupid shit, Hans Karl starts chewing on the edge of the straw as his parents yell back and forth, pitching the conversation like a tennis ball on fire as his father starts shuffling cards at the table, listening to his 40 years of cigarette smoke laden mother use her lungs to a capacity that simply won't matter in the end, shuffling shuffling shuffling, until, after what must be an hour of this and the day cycle seems to restart itself and the food has long gone cold, his father snaps the cards down on the table and wordlessly, as his mother practically follows him towards the separated

in place fault line up the stairs, jumps and shakes with rage and curses like four truckers having an argument inside of her as her husband, morose and overcooked, shutters the makeshift door at the top of the stairs behind him until she wanders back down and just *pleads* for a *man's* shoulder to cry on …

V^V^V^V^V^V^V^V^V^V^V^V^V^V^

"Blowh. Like in Zelda, when you've got low life. Bank account blinking near zero, it echoes in my pasture." Farmer Faber passes the 'cigar,' totally 100% tobacco, to Hans Karl, as they sit around the firepit in the center of the barn. Hans Karl, in his hoodie, is wearing a ring that he hasn't worn now since it got stolen when he was on vacation down in Maryland, according to the thought log. Instead, the old Farmer tells him not to be worried, that he's going to build his *mental muscles* and his *physical ones, too* by his Father's outsourcing of his labor in a way that *no robot is going to be able to replace*. The barn goes dark. Now, seated with his palms laid flat on his jeans, Hans Karl, totally human, with his hood up, sits in front of the fireplace crackling in the barn, as a whip-flash of the same guinea pigs seated around him crawling around the maggot-sucking and fly-circling ribcage of the dead farmer like a demented playground flashes, an *ommmmmmming* sound coming from the animals as they join hands around the fire.

I found a way to hack the animals, Hans Karl whispers into the flickering flames, and then, from his seat drenched in hay, he raises a book, leatherbound and tight with golden pages reflecting in the flames, the guinea pigs with their own microchips and the birds in the rafters and some huge crow outside going ENNNYH UH, ENNNNYH UH across the abyss where the same low-life warning sound from the video games supposedly echoed in Faber's tunneled-out eyelids, Hans Karl says, "It is written in the book of Faraguh that the world ended due to microchips …" the guinea pigs raise their claws to the sky as he turns it, nothing on the pages except blank space, but then filling with cartoon drawings, stencils of the fair with the reaper, the dinner table, his father with an automaton fucking in the place his mother died but on a different bed for RESPECT scrawled in the same handwriting … "According to the old laws, the robots stole creation, the CEOs and big thinkers suddenly were forced to mine the caves and mow the fields to protect investments …" people stripped from suits, strapped and whipped into chains and being forced underground …

Hans Karl's eyes roll back in his head and his chin flickers underneath the flames as he echoes the EYYYYNNNHHH UH, EYYNNNNH UHH, and in the center, a version of himself on the page, stenciled and with the same look he gave the HeadHunter, wanders up a staircase to where his father's grunts and groans echo through the empty house, and he walks outside,

down the frontward path towards his shed of ritual, and as the Farmer's body fills with bullet holes from the metaversal targets, the bullet buyers in the bleachers at the very same funeral where he fucked BellaBot senseless, Hans Karl, dressed as piggums and in the same robes of death the HeadHunters wore, raps on the door to the shed, with no answer to be heard except his father's adulation for his mother's likeness plastered in the coding and in the fake imitation of the very flesh that birthed him …

V^V^V^V^V^V^V^V^V^V^V^V^V^

The Christmas Tree is set up with a smiling faced angel on the top of it. Back then, the Lieber household had sunlight that stretched across the very same floor where the oopsy block accident happened, and smelled like coffee brewing vs cigarette smoke across the entirety of the den, death's perfume, as HK recalls it now. On the very same floor which caused the ~~subdural~~ epidural hematoma due to the magic known as *gravity always winning*, Hans Karl, aged 8, sits with his mother using her iPhone in an ugly Christmas sweater and his father proudly beaming in front of his wall of chess trophies, having already seen his son hungrily rip the wrapping paper off the Real Man lumberjack sweaters probably triggering his mother's envy and the Santa hat over his head making it seem perfectly smooth. Now, though, as Mrs. Lieber, from the couch, tells her son, *Go on, Hans Karl, open it!*, the kid crawls, in his oversize sweatpants, black shirt, glasses bumping the bridge of his nose, and attempts to shake the box. In the background, a dog in the kitchen barks, so Hans Karl can tell, from the *living!* sticker he's partially unearthed, that it isn't a *second* furry, lifetime companion, but he claps his hands on the side of his somewhat pudgy face and goes OHHH MY GOD!

"Yes, you called?" Mr. Lieber says, trading a pre-divorce glance with his wife and watching as she echoes his joy with a wide smile. "Open it, son!"

"No *way!*" Hans Karl says. "Trevor and Ali are going to be *so* jealous!" In front of him, nearly mimicking his height, stands a perfectly dressed MyFirstFriend™ in its box. This is the *Almost Golden Boy edition*: mid-range intelligence to make your child feel *confident*, programmed to *stay out of trouble* and be a *perfect little worker*, including the charging base (battery life of 16 hours depending on physical exertion, programmed circadian and diametrically opposed to *negative behaviors* such as late nights, underage drinking, and Mrs. Lieber's fears of *kids fucking in the high school hallways*, her husband reassured her, because that *totally* happens in reality, she'd know, having never set foot in one!) and with upgrades available to correlate with age. And, just as advertised, when removed from the box and properly stacked, the panel, as the kid's sneakered feet glow red on his charging base and his animatronic eyes, so *outdated* in this memory, glow

underneath their eyelids, his perfect blonde hair and smooth elliptical head so realistic Mrs. Lieber could *die*, his panel allows Hans Karl to christen him *TIMOTHY.* Hardly an hour later, the child and the FIRST FRIEND are playing baseball on the lawn, with the HeadCagetm for Hans Karl tripling as a helmet, a planetarium of metal protecting his skull, and a forcefield due to the plastic walls on it, as Mrs. Lieber and Mr. Lieber share a glowing moment of pride under the early February sunlight beaming down onto the sidewalk through the tree branches on their front lawn.

"Wow," Gerald says, placing his hands in his pocket as his wife continues recording with her phone, the phone's message of *you need to pay for more storage, your 40TBs are almost up!* "And to think: he and his friend are having the *time of their lives*!"

"It's so *safe* with him playing sports this way," Mrs. Lieber says, zooming in as her son throws the ball at an awkward angle to the robot, who takes a swing and says, "Good try, buddy!"

"You don't think he'll feel inferior?" Gerald asks.

"Nooooo," Mrs. Lieber says. "I've been at their cute little holiday socials, and his *real* friends are the kinds of kids to play with *knives*."

At this, Hans Karl steps back, loads the ball again, and fires an underhanded pitch, softball style, right into the arc of the bat being swung by the automaton. The automaton *cracks* it at an angle somehow unpredictable to programming, and it goes *flying* straight at Hans Karl's face and smacks him in the center. Gerald laughs, but Mrs. Lieber can barely stop recording as she intercepts Hans Karl and his wielded baseball bat halfway across the lawn.

"Hans Karl!" she says, "What are you doing?"

"The thing fucking *hit me!*" the kid says.

"I am sorry, young master Lieber," the TimBot says, lowering its head and attempting with every bit of its circuitry to show *sympathy*. "If your mother wishes to flog me, she may, but we may not promote violence in our recreation."

"Says the *robot* that just hit me *in the face!*"

"Your father paid a lot of money for this friend," Mrs. Lieber says, pointing her finger at the robot again in a scolding way. "And Timothy's right: if you have a disagreement, you need to solve it with *words!*"

"Fine," Hans Karl says. "*Fuck him!*"

"*Excuse you!*" Mrs. Lieber says, as the TimBot says, "I object to the impolite usage of your language, Hans Karl. While I do not possess feelings, if I were a real boy, your words may escalate a conflict."

"*You hit me in the FACE!*" Hans Karl says, his hands at his sides, exasperated.

“What occurred was an unintentional consequence of physics combined with your throwing vector being abnormal.”

“Did you just call me *retarded*?” Hans Karl asks.

“Honey,” Mrs. Lieber says, as Gerald goes up the stairs to get the USER GUIDE. “That’s not a good word to say.”

“That’s strike two,” TimBot says. “First, your reaction to unintended risk during the course of our game resulted in your threat of physical violence, and second, you used a derogatory term for persons with intellectual disabilities, reflecting your own projected lack of self-confidence.”

“Oh, well aren’t *you* the perfect little humanoid,” Hans Karl says, as his father studiously examines the retrieved user manual. “Fine, want *me* to be the batter?”

“Of course,” Timbot says, it’s placid, too-straight smile handing Hans Karl the bat and going to where the grass is already indented from his sneakers. “What kind of velocity would you like me to use? Judging by your pitching skills and your programmed frame, an underhanded throw might be the proper vector to increase your chances of *connecting*.”

“Throw it to me like an MLB pitcher,” Hans Karl says, taking the metal bat behind his back as his mother steps back next to his father, who is now going on about *roughhouse settings* in the *boys will be boys* mode. As his mother leans over to read them alongside him, there’s a whoosh and then a crack and an *injury sustained, maintenance* required sound, and Mrs. Lieber gasps as she looks down at her phone to pause the video. “God dammit, Hans Karl!”

“Sorry, was that *unpredicted?*”

“Indeed,” The TimBot replies, sitting up with its right hand indented from where the bat had flown into it. “I reacted just in time to block the metal bat from impacting anything except the end of my extremities, but it would appear one of my fingers has been bent, requiring correction from an adult!”

Mr. Lieber sighs, and Mrs. Lieber tries to correct it, as Hans Karl walks his way past his father hardly saying a word and stomps up the same stairs with heavier, intentional steps, allowing the echo of the screen door in his absence to ripple across the barren front lawn where he once threw footballs with his father, before he got promoted…

27:

“Murder one?” Braise asks, ashing ‘his’ joint, registered to someone else, on the shared ashtray in front of us. The private room at the lounge in New Jersey, above the pulsing music of the mingle-floor, reverberates in the glass. On the facsimile above us, the sound chamber is completely restricted: not even the air is flowing correctly for us to be overheard. We

might as well be three peas in a vacuum sealed pod. I shake my head no. He picks it up, lights it again, the tobacco mixture doing enough to trick my mouth into salivating like it used to with my own mother back in days where some of this still happened, some of it assuredly did not, and other shit happened in ways that were different in a way that's unchangeable, behind us.

"Conspiracy to commit murder," Braise says. Montserrat, stonier than a whore at his or her wedding, nods no.

"No hay evidencia de eso, y el Piggums es un hombre que sabe todo de tecnología."

Exactly: they weren't able to find jack shit about how those guinea pigs magically coordinated together, and upon the ripping review where every circuit, every microchip, nanochip, implant, and wire was examined more scrupulously than the aftermath of a bombing, by human eye and AI alike, the only thing we could conclude is that something caused the autonomous code to malfunction, obviously.

"In the wild," I say, crossing my dress socked ankles and peering out the window at a bird with perhaps a mechanical eye perched in silence on the frame. "Guinea pigs aren't carnivores, are they?"

"You're so fucking high," Montserrat says, taking his own spliff and ripping another drag from it, his right leg bouncing so much the buttons on his jeans are colliding with his belt at an audible tapping level. "In the *wild*, animals don't do things like *this*."

"Conspiracy to overthrow the government of the United States is a human idea," Braise says, sitting back and crossing his arms over his leather jacket with a huge sigh, his eyes bloodshot from both the ganja and the lack of sleep in both their veins and the dreary clumps of shadowed skin under his usually speed-demon stretched tight face. "But the problem is that we've confused domestic terrorism with a family therapy session."

"It's not *natural*," Montserrat says, rubbing the sides of his face. "To hate one's own *father* like that."

The kid's agreed to sit down with another guided session following the one yesterday; strangely, for someone who Braise and Leo and I thought was going to tear it all down, he's been super cooperative with the people who he knows aren't cops and who like to have their fun in the way that we obviously, legally do. However, his father's skepticism resulted in strange cars following him to the office, pulling away at certain velocities, windows shaded, tires gliding, and I can't help but think that our friends on both sides of the aisle, proverbially, and both sides of the alley are watching young Mr. Lieber with an intensity that we can obviously see, but can't rationally, legally snare. It's like watching someone get addicted to a legal opiate and just buy bottle after bottle, is what I tell my coworkers, and

being unable to use any mechanism, no matter what power we have, to get them to put it down because the pain is getting killed and that, with human capacity and animal need mixing, has been enough to tear down a number of empires and make men much older, in times as strange as this one, do things that would make any general's skin crawl when they were *really* pushed down to it.

"And it's his *father's money* he's spending," Braise says, breaking the contemplation with a usual chuckle. "All to have competing versions of a woman who died."

"Well, you can see from the thoughts, it was like the young kid was *married* to his mother," I say, taking the wilting edges of my roach and pushing it into the flower-shaped glass. "You've got that trauma, surely sexual trauma of some kind as well, although we can't confirm that, thus resulting in the hyper-sexuality, and I'm not a psychologist-"

"Because you haven't considered putting a bullet through your temple after watching it!" Leo interjects, and I snort, but then push through.

"I'm *not* a psychologist, but we're told to look for rage, discontent, malicious intention," I say, steepling my hands. "If the goal was to kill Farmer Faber because of him what … forcing the kid to work without money?"

"It certainly has gotten harder to be a young person nowadays," Braise says, taking out a true cigarillo and sitting back like he's a shadowed force, with it pinched between his index and middle finger. "And the kid wanted to be an *artist*."

Montserrat makes a combined cough, choking, and scoffing sound, something like a muffler with issues being revved. "Parents of the fucking century, acclimating him to the world."

"So you grow a kid in isolation, marry him to his mother, give him an absent, hyper-logical father, pair him with technology as his only friends, and then basically deny his medical reality," I say, like trying to build a solid tower with silly putty. "And … and anyone's *surprised* at the result being this violent, this depraved?"

"I don't think surprise is the question, nor the problem," Braise says, exhaling skywards towards the exhaust fan. "Most insane conclusions, or at least a lot of them, can be seen from about four hundred miles away if one looks hard enough."

"But if he's found a way to cause animal implants to commit murder, *that* can't be allowed."

"No shit, but we can't swoop in there on speculation and ask him if he's had fun manipulating technology in a way even we don't understand," Braise says, sighing again, sitting up straight in his leather chair. "Plus, we need to get to the bottom of the guinea pig shit. Sir Alex is allowing him full

run and fair room because the kid's using his father's funds to help fund their unreality, and so long as he doesn't do anything violent, the fact a massive programming error resulting from *some* type of tampering caused a fatality is a mixture of fate and human hands ever since trials for the first airplane, Duncan." Braise says. I look back out the window, at the twinkling eyes of the small bird perched on the thin, naked limb of the branches outside. *Evidence of tampering by human hands with no fingerprints*. Leo stretches. Braise stands, planting his feet on the floor with a thud and already using his ride share application to pick him up here. "Are you ready to ascend to the next level of your servitude, Mister Chausser?"

I nod, steepling my fingers again and pressing them against my forehead. How wild: to be a person, a whole in the universe and yet a part of something, and finding a guiding principle larger than one's self in a way that might last *forever*, with my body and my spirit and my voice, according to what Sir Alex is offering and I saw Farmer Faber, murder solved by *glitch in technology occurring as it always has, officially*, renanimated on that stage in a way his widow clapped for, his kids lauded, and which he, if he were here, would have no chance to question because the point where he stops and ends completed and then re-opened like a line connecting to a point, only to press on with an arrowhead, forever …

28:

On a cold morning like this, where the sun hasn't even peaked through the clouds and the threat of rain hangs in the pushing wind, the lights in Euphoria are on but the atmosphere is decidedly seasonal. In the same way the winter waits for the sunlight of spring and for flowers to bloom, so does the home away from home, aside from the *lifers* downstairs, wait for the evening crowd of people to shuffle in: the automatrons on deck, with red-flaming hair and topless as the day they were made in the factory, move around the bar and pretend like their playing of slot machines, the pool game, the card table with uno and blackjack and hold'em, are actually meant for their fun versus to portray the image of what the 20s were, what the now *is*. And there are still some men, don't get me wrong, who are populating the area, less with a roar, more with a *exactly what positions are open for people to work here?* That's what I hear one of them ask, as he's been drinking since the place re-opened after cleaning, after the disinfection cycle, and the bartender, a middle aged white guy who isn't giving the impression of wanting to be there, either, says he started after he went broke and never looked back *since*. My resume, meanwhile, has been tailored and fit for any kind of robotic eye to scan it: we made up some service experience from my high school, my college days, gave me a bonus for being able to upsell people different digital contacts since what could be seen is seen better with the right pair of lenses that fuse to your corneas and crack your vision into outer space, *dude*. The point is, however, for my

evaluation and my *initiation* following my *epiphany at being able to see the world from the perspective of willpower*, as the correspondence went, my job is no longer my job, and this job is the job I need considering the fact the tab we ran up was, well, *exceptional*. Meanwhile, with the dance floors mostly barren, only shaded, tireless automatrons refueled on their oil and perpetually moving between the walls of sound echoing from where the rabbit DJ stood atop that podium, for example, I feel like I'm watching the gears on a car turning while it's parked and raised off the ground, never quite stopping, but also going nowhere. And, seeing the expanse of it sober, the money invested, the scents of the cleaners being deployed and the humming of the machines over the carpeted areas to extract the sweat, the dirt, the *other things*, the fact there are people who sleep downstairs with their faces literally changed, sculpted like erosion from the masks they wear over their eyes, naturally, their skulls changed and their neurons woven in with the nanochips, my commitment, as Sir Alex told me, will be tested not only by evolving, but by *transforming myself appropriately*, because its not just what is learned on the path to true euphoria, he said in the phone call, but also what is *unlearned* about the natural world. Such is the approach Rajesh and him take when they pop up from behind the bar, greet me solemnly, and then direct me downward, past the people who don't sleep and whose laughs echo through the armchair chambers, half moons, in ways they can't hear because their headphones funnel the noise so well and their bodies, fat and lazy and insane to the material world, are different, sculpted, the abs underneath their chests rippling in a way they can't truly be, but feel just enough for it to *be* just enough, too …

The room is well lit by candles, a series of triangles, vaguely European, I've seen them before, and art on the walls that is so gorgeously psychedelic, I feel like I never left the club. In the center, I am led to a chair by Sir Alex, with a short, circular table, complete with replicas and chess boards lining the wall amidst the slight smoke of incense, the smell of burning in a pleasant way that crawls up my nostrils and makes me want to sneeze. He and Rajesh, now dressed in robes but with their hoods down, sit across from me, with Rajesh suddenly seeming older, his suit and collared shirt almost looking like he's dressed like a fancy superhero. Sir Alex, meanwhile, is practically regal, his ringed fingers and sharp, deep blue eyes regarding me across his folded hands, with my resume in the center, unread, beneath the folder, whose edge was slightly wetted by cleanser perspiration atop the bar, stained more in the smell of it than in the surface. Sir Alex smiles, opening the folder, and he runs his callused fingertips, maybe from guitar, across the paper with somewhat of a scratch, and I fold my hands in my lap and cross my ankles again, feeling the pulse of my veins

against my shinbone as a way to remind me this is *real*. After passing the resume, unread, to Rajesh, Rajesh picks it up, scans it, flips the page over, and then, in one motion, folds it in half, folds it again in half, and then tears it with a strip down the center that makes my shoulderblades arch into the metal chair behind me.

"Apologies," Rajesh says, standing up and proceeding to a trash can beneath a library style bookcase with yellowed pages and volumes befitting a mid 20th century professor's study. He opens the trash can, tosses the paper in, and Sir Alex gleams at me with his hands steepled into a triangle of their own.

"So," Sir Alex says, in a low, clear voice. "You wish to join Euphoria, Master Chausser?"

I open my palm towards where Rajesh went and then returned. "As you would've seen from my resume, I have tremendous service experience."

"Your background doesn't matter, to be honest," Rajesh says, his manager's tone returning. "It's what you do from now on that counts."

"Rajesh is correct," Sir Alex says, laying the back of his hand down on the table. "May I see your right hand?"

I oblige, and he takes his own palm underneath it in the style of a reader. After staring at it for a few seconds, he runs a perfectly cut fingernail across my ring finger, where the slight indentation still exists like a healing cut with no scabs.

"You were married, Mister Chausser," Sir Alex says, withrdrawing his hands slowly. "So was I, at a time."

"Before God and the whole nine yards?" Rajesh asks, as I draw my hand back to my lap, feeling whiplashed into embarrassment.

"Yes," I say. "But what does that have to do with my basis as an employee?"

"Nothing," Sir Alex says, as though he just blocked my diagonal check attempt with a bishop of his own to force a queen trade. "But it certainly has an impact on your owner's mindset."

"I don't want to buy stock in this place," I say, which draws a polite, knowing smile and a nod from Rajesh and a clean grin from Sir Alex.

"No, but you're a man who is, like much of our clientele, affiliated with Braise or not, who likes to buy things, use things, *own* things," Sir Alex says, standing up with his hands behind his back. "You see, Mister Chausser, while we are not a commune here at Euphoria, and we're all capitalists, we definitely engage in what you've obviously observed to be *communal elements*."

"Would I be expected to live on the premises?" I ask, my mouth dry.

"You would be expected to be honest," Sir Alex replies. "And while the story of you going broke and joining us, having a change of heart or a

depletion of bank account, has a kernel of truth at its base, I don't buy the fact you don't want to be an *owner*."

"What does being an owner have to do with serving beers to lonely men?" I ask him, and with that drawing a scowl from Rajesh, I quickly add, "*And* women!"

"Because this lifestyle, this pursuit of true euphoria, is a mentality, Sir Chausser." Sir Alex says. "A man like you might be the fastest liquor drinker and resultantly the most adept pourer on the east coast, but you still feel as though you have a right to own your former wife."

"No, I don't," I say, incredulous, jerking my knee so fast I bang it on the non-echoing underside of the table. "We are legally divorced as of three months ago."

"Yes, but I was there when Mister Lieber used the woman's visage who was *not* your ex-wife as an example for you in his adult playground," he says, shrugging his shoulders. "Ada, one of our most faithful duals, who serves in both the metaverse and in Euphoria, said you weren't even able to escape your own mind enough to enjoy her services. She has a partner, you know, and she engages in pleasantries with other men all the time, as volunteered by both of them."

"Alright, I'll admit it," I say, sighing, looking down at the table. "I had had a bit to drink on the evening in question."

"And you're applying to be a *bartender*?" Rajesh asks, his teeth breaking into a brilliant smile between his beard, and he chuckles afterwards. "Your logic is nonsensical, Mister Chausser."

"Listen," I tell them, leaning in. "If you've been divorced before, Sir Alex-"

"Widowed," he says, coldly.

"I'm sorry for your loss," I say, putting my hand on my heart. He doesn't react. "But listen to me, to get over something such as that, truly, takes … I don't know, therapy?"

"It takes will," Sir Alex says. "And some might argue time, distance, space. As you can tell from a couple of our mutual acquaintances, for some people, getting over it only works until it's above you and staring down, if you know what I mean."

"Absolutely," I say. "Absolutely. That's why I'm attempting to change my life and to repay this ridiculous amount of debt that I wasn't sure I was accruing."

"It's a credit card," Sir Alex scoffs. "Isn't Braise paying you enough at your day job to avoid you having to double shift extra hours?"

"That's not even the point," Rajesh says, crossing his arms. "The point is, you're still someone who thinks you need to *own* in order to *be*."

“What do I have to do to prove you wrong?” I ask, genuinely, tapering my anger into sharpness versus volume.

“Have us strip search you instead of just patting you down, turn off Braise’s facsimile,” Sir Alex says, cracking his grin open again. “Just kidding, we know the world’s somewhat open source at this juncture.” Sir Alex turns his back, with his hand around his wrist, and he steps over to a chessboard on the table. He picks it up and, like a server coming to a table, walks back over, and sets it down in the center the glass pieces barely move. This time, he’s playing white, and the black pieces in front of me are parts of an equation I can barely solve. He takes the white queen and the white king from his side of the board and then places them squarely in the center, in the place where the two pawns usually go, and he takes his index finger and plants it directly in the center of the queen’s head.

“Did you love her?” He asks me.

“Who?” I ask.

“Your ex wife, the two of you who committed such sacrilege before god.”

“Of course I did,” I say, now my neck getting hot under the blue tie’s grip.

“And do you own her now?”

“I never *owned* her.”

“Bullshit,” Sir Alex says, moving the queen forward a square towards me. “Certain texts in the kinds of churches used in this country say that the man is to the woman as God is to the man, do they not, Mister Chausser?”

“We were a dual income partnership.”

“And yet when you were faced,” Sir Alex says, reaching over to my side, picking up the black queen, and placing it down in front of the white king. “With the most attractive woman this side of the stratosphere, in a form where she requires no actual love to function, but rewards and incentivizes those who show her that, in whatever form that may be, you couldn’t even perform sexually after seeing a dead man, reanimated, copulate without procreating with a digital spectre who *wasn’t even her*.”

“Because I was intoxicated,” I say. “I was drinking in my apartment.”

“So,” Sir Alex says, picking up the white queen and using her as a pointer towards the door from which we came. “If we were to have Ada walk directly through those doors, the automatron version of her which Gerald’s borrowed for his metaversal circus, you would have no issue walking her upstairs and experiencing the freedom between her legs while, at the same time, Rajesh took that ‘BellaBot,’ as you call her, and tested to ensure our product is of the highest quality and cleanliness standards?”

I squint, flinching, and Sir Alex squints himself while pointing the green felt bottom of the chess piece at me in a *gotcha, brother* way. “The

human reaction does not lie!" He plants the black queen back on my side, and keeps the white queen in the center for a moment before returning them to where they were. Then, from memory, and faster than I ever thought possible, he moves the pawns, the bishops, the board into the *exact* position of the game we didn't finish from the *inverse* position, as if I were him and he were me.

"Say it for me," Sir Alex says, raising his hands. "I am owned by nothing, and nothing I own."

I look up at him, his expectant eyes gleaming in the firelight of the wall torches. "I am owned by nothing, and nothing I own."

"Again."

"I am owned by nothing, and nothing I own."

"Like you *mean it*, Duncan, like you *care*."

"I am *owned*," I say, leaning in, doing my best DiCaprio impression. "By *nothing*, and *nothing* I own."

"Are you homeless?"

"I'm a renter, at the moment."

"And do you want to be married again in the near future?"

"I'm not married to a near future of any kind."

"Excellent," Sir Alex says, sharing a grin with Rajesh. "Then we're going to put you on a waiting list for when a position opens. Say it for me again, will you?"

I sigh, my temples pounding, knowing it was going to come to this, and ready to open my wallet in a way that's going to hurt. I reach into my pocket, pulling it out, and Rajesh chokes back a cough, clearing his throat four times, as Sir Alex, incredulous, turns back around and puts both palms down on the table.

"I thought you needed money?" Sir Alex asks me.

"Listen," I tell them.

"No, we already did that," Sir Alex says. "What is your game here, Duncan?"

"I'm … I'm trying to understand."

"You don't," Sir Alex says. "Not to sound like that little green wise man, but this isn't a question of *trying*," he rocks the table with his knuckles. "It's a question of *will*, Chausser, *will*! And a man who has been made *guilty* by the world for *wanting* cannot free others if he himself is still trapped!"

"I want to see more," I tell him, clapping my debit card on the table.

"Do you think we're whores?" Rajesh asks, his arms folded again, his tone flat. "You think you can just pay us for whatever you want?"

“Isn’t *bribery* illegal?” Sir Alex asks, with his arms behind him again and his glance with Rajesh as though I’m a kid trying to buy a pack of cigarettes at his store.

“Hans Karl told me something,” I say, and this catches their attention, Sir Alex checking a breath in his throat like a batter deciding not to swing. “He said that there’s a way for people here to live forever.”

“Ohhhhh, sweet Jesus,” Rajesh says, and Sir Alex curses, sitting down again and rattling the chessboard between us. “The kid’s too mouthy.”

“It’s because he has that fuc- that curse-ed *brain* thing,” Sir Alex says, fidgeting and holding a hand up to the left side of his head. “He needs to talk to process things and ends up being too proud of his achievements, sometimes.”

“It’s not a fatal flaw,” Rajesh says, nodding at me. “But Mister Chausser seems intrigued.”

“I’m intrigued to the extent that I want everything that happens here to be legal, moral, and ethical.”

“That’s like saying you want everything to be red, white, *and* blue at the same time,” Sir Alex says. “They often come together, but they don’t *mix and stay the same*. Sometimes, you get purple, or in your case,” he looks at my blazer. “Gray.”

“I am absolutely sure of the fact that the automatron part of your business is completely fine,” I say, tapping my card on the table like I’m cutting an invisible line of coke. “But if there’s engagement, in the same way Gerald Lieber does with his continuing of his wife, that influences little Hans Karl’s behavior-”

Sir Alex cuts me off, raising his right palm in a flat way, before flipping it over and revealing the sapphire planted directly in the place where his diamond ring must’ve been when his own wife were still alive. “In terms of men who’ve lost their wives,” Sir Alex says. “And in terms of how to keep them living on past memory, I can assure you, Mister Chausser, the boy’s father is a worse influence than the two of us over here.”

“I don’t disagree,” I tell him. “But the point is, if the kid, as you might’ve seen-”

“He’s a legal adult,” Rajesh says, incredulous, his brow furrowing and tone narrowing. However, Sir Alex turns to *him* now and tells him to wait. *Continue*, he motions to me.

“The kid’s been through a tremendous amount of pain, as have many people who frequent this establishment. The point is, you have power, his father has power, and that kid, himself, has a lot of power, too. My whole point is, I just want to be able to know he’s using it for good.”

“Innocent until proven guilty,” Rajesh says, and Sir Alex laughs, but does indeed cut in front of him.

“I understand your point, Mister Chausser, very well played,” he says, taking his queen and laying it on its side in a show of resignation. “So you’re saying you’d like to be a friend, on a personal level, of what we’re doing here beyond the flashing lights upstairs? Perhaps you’ve got someone you’d like to speak with who has passed?”

“Potentially,” I tell him. “Are those kinds of memberships available?”

“Only for the true intentioned,” Sir Alex says, winking at me. “Fifty dollars for a trial service.”

“Fifty?” I ask.

“Fine,” Sir Alex says. “Sixty, and you can nest with Ada, too.”

I take out my personal card, having already been prepared for this, and yet, even with the queen on its side in front of me, when Rajesh pulls up his mobile device with a *these fucking people* roll of his eyes to complete the transaction, Sir Alex is the one who is making *us* play street ball; he said we won, but as he sticks his fingers between me and the card reader, causing me to jerk it and for the transaction to bounce, when I look into his eyes, they’re like steel knives pressed against my jugular without cutting.

“Just to be clear,” Sir Alex says. “If I sense one attempt from an outside party to disrupt the legal, profitable activities of my business, so long as they’re in accordance with all applicable laws, you and I can debate morality until the ends of the earth, but I will sue you until you *bleed*, do you understand?”

“Completely,” I say, swallowing hard. “I will respect all norms and traditions of the establishment.”

“Repeat it one more time,” he says, and when I catch myself wanting to say *I own nothing*, he laughs with an open mouth and removes his hand.

“Good man, mister Chausser, good man indeed…”

Beep.

APPROVED!

The receipt prints, he extends his hand, and he tells me to return in four hours dressed in something darker and lighter, perhaps a robe, a suit, or, of course, one could be provided to me after the club opens as well …
+Sir Alex stands the black queen back up at the end as well for scene end
+add Mrs L shouting for HKL not to trip and the dad being like “he’s not even moving” and the mother being like I’m just being careful!
+”Now Hans Karl, you know Ali’s a nice boy, but his parents won’t even let him have a first friend!”

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Back when *I* was a child, before all of this, the kids who didn’t do anything got bullied, full stop. They were the gamers who went to LAN parties, the ones who wandered around in hoodies and dashed through the hallways like Naruto characters, as I’m sure you know, and who were

generally societally outcasted. Then, when they'd grow up, they'd post on places like Reddit about doing everything I did, basically – good job, decent earnings, house ownership, not killing one's self with smoking or drinking, gambling or vices – but would be forever alone. Here, in the bowels of Euphoria which Sir Alex, Rajesh, and I are walking through, there's a stench of sterilization, perfume pumped through air and not on bodies in a flowery garden, barely masking the musk of what the Nothings are doing down here: sweating, stroking, fucking by any other word, in some type of unholy communion, isolated in their own chambers, and then each wandering out to shared buffet tables where people very unlike the kids who sat at their own tables, circular and dejected, talk about what they've done. They sit close and talk in hushed voices, their robes flowing over their backs and down to their ankles in different colors depending on their paygrade and level of servitude to their true god: not Sir Alex, he stresses to me, but more so their own *minds*, what they're allowed to *do* and *be* here without, as Rajesh says, "pretending."

"Out there," Sir Alex says, as we move through the din of the underground dining hall, my own ass essentially smarting thinking of the indents they each have on the backside of their legs from only moving when forced to for food, for disinfecting, happy cattle and superior *masters of their own desire*, if only in their Spectacles. "Their lives revolved around it anyway." The keys jangle, the door turns. "They would go to work at their menial jobs, cashier, assembly line, their robot bosses and efficient, cybernetic managers telling them to work harder, not smarter, leave the smarts to them, and they'd be thinking all day of the depravity they'd enact behind their keyboards, in front of their screens … here, the societal pretense is removed, Duncan, and they're allowed to exist without having to masquerade in a society so polite, yet so violent, they'd have them shoot up a store or pop themselves in the temples and not even give a shit if they lived or died!" He finishes his gospel, opens the door towards us, and Rajesh, with his own mobile device recording, suddenly, stands in front of me and says, "This is just to affirm, in a way that isn't deep-faked, that you have indeed read, signed, and will adhere to the non-disclosure agreement for what you're about to witness as someone positioned in an observational role solely to guarantee the sanctity and affirm the legality of this premises, correct, Duncan L. Chausser?"

"That's right," I tell him, nodding, as some truly joyful laughter pops from somewhere behind me, along with the scrape of forks across a plate and a sexy automatron chef wiggling her ass as she holds a tray of sausages in her hands. If what I've seen has been like walking through the brain of a new adult, isolated male imagining heaven, in all its corned bliss, the fact this next room, with a series of four people or automatons, can't tell the difference at this point, sitting in leatherback chairs with screens showing *all* of Euphoria in front of them, is marked with a ! inside a triangle and the words DEPRAVITY CONTROL scrawled on the metal door, a sick tightening occurs in my midsection, like I've strapped myself into a belt too tight, and

when Sir Alex explains to his soldiers about how I'm cleared here, am solely doing my job to make sure that they're still functioning legally, how it'll *increase their ethos and pull even more in*, they hand me a headset, give me a controller, and tell me, in case of ejection, there's an old-fashioned, secure handled metal bucket ready to catch my objections before they smack the ground …

The first man I witness is a soldier in a war, Call of Duty but on the metaversal stage, and he's, of course, beating the Nazis for the first time in a hundred years. Here he is, gun in his hand and adrenaline pumping, shooting up at a ridge of gun drawn delinquent creations so real you can practically feel the sand under the fake boots that someone's *real* great great grandfather ran across to allow people the freedom to not have bullet physics make any *fucking* sense. The next man, as Sir Alex explains, is *legally* living out his fantasy of *doing to the bad people what the bad people did to the good*¸ where there's essentially a penal colony or punishment camp made to be extremely cold, and yet instead of being the German overseeing the Jewish people, this is a guy who is one of the ones I saw shoveling sausage and cheese drenched mashed potatoes in his face making a bunch of male automatons get whip cracked across their backs for trying to beat America in a world war. And he's *brutal* to them: you can hear the sharp point in his voice, the stomping of his boots on the ground as he, for what must be thirty minutes, delights in making these completely naked except for the mosaic covered nether regions *bot humans* pick up rocks from one side of the rubble, carry them over to another, and then repeat the task for no purpose except to tire them out, under threat of the overseer, in this case our headset wearing 'friend,' taking out his own rifle and popping them for insubordination, with options described like he's whipping a band of horses to *do it faster, do it cleaner*. This commandant screams across the expanse at the *evil people* that he'll essentially rape their sisters if they don't comply, the rubble from whatever wall he's found and the tank corpses bleeding oil that they need to use their bare hands to scrub clean for recycling each a symbol of his pure power, and that's when I realize that the hardness they feel isn't only at the insanely perfect bodies of the automatrons, its at doing shit like this. Sir Alex explains, through the communication system, that since this is a fantasy based on historical accuracy – they hate to say it, but *every* army raped in war, don't I know – it would be extremely hard to argue that what this patron is doing violates obscenity laws, especially since its isolated to his eyeballs, and as I nod my head and watch the man follow through on his promise, one of the quiet, vaguely Germanic, completely 'unreal' automatrons wearing a German pilgrim's dress being led to the *punishment shack* by this 8-ball of a human being in his camo fatigues cracking his voice by shouting *you'll be sorry you lost the war!*, I realize the same thing law enforcement officers, themselves depraved as any other human in some ways, must realize while watching shit like this through spy cams and trolling search histories of mass

shooters: *give someone a place where they think no one is watching and the worst will trickle down and shoot out when they think its good*. In this case, although none of this actually *happened*, I swear I can hear the vile joy from the guy who absolutely never strapped on any real army gear in his chamber echoing through the metal walls as whatever happens *there* happens, and while my stomach lurches once, I don't quite need the bucket, even as Sir Alex continues explaining that their payment justifies some of this, and that if I think *this* is bad, just wait until you see what *Beauregard* is doing next door …

The only time I ever visited a plantation was to attend a wedding, something I still feel guilty for, but this one is one I tell Sir Alex is probably going to raise so many red flags you'd think they were poppies falling out a castle tower to honor the war dead: apparently, this northern guy, someone from New York, even, a *former tax accountant before those jobs got nixed*, has decided to imagine himself as the owner of a massive ass plantation. Now, the slaves aren't Black, they aren't brown people, they're actually *white*, and these robots are essentially, under threat of whip and claw, inhabiting a reality that this man's created where he's the *owner* of the plantation and all his slaves are the same robots that replaced him and the writers, the legal analysts, the financial advisers, the CEOs, the software engineers, and they're being forced to *literally* harvest cryptocurrency under threat of lash, meaning there's an entire *farm* of graphics cards (in reality! Sir Alex stresses. He pays for an entire *four chambers!*) being air sprayed and wired and replaced by a series of robots dressed in the most demeaning costumes possible: they're dressed in those googly eyed, antenna strapped, square headed robot costumes with a bunch of burly, evergreen smelling lumberjacks being used as avatars by flesh and blood humans who crack them in the back with electrical cords when they don't spray the receptors positively. I say to Sir Alex, in a voice numbed beyond tonality, "this isn't illegal, but something feels *wrong* about it," which prompts the owner to ask me whether or not I've ever read *Citizens United*, and before I can respond, the robot-slave driver shouts "IT'S TIME TO REVERSE THE ROLES, WE WILL NOT LIVE OUR LIVES SOLELY SUBJECTED TO BEING THE SERVANTS OF AUTOMATION!" before picking a particularly vulnerable looking, short haired automaton who apparently had spliced the wires wrong into a motherboard, cocking his shotgun, and telling her, "DO THE DANCE LIKE YOU WERE PROGRAMMED," and she literally, actually starts doing "the robot" in the cleaning and installation line to the biological master's satisfaction, as the pure venom drips from his unnaturally unchapped lips about *DO my calculations, TABULATE my earnings you stupid fucking metal unfeeling piece of SHIT* … before we can see or hear or feel the reverberations of anything *else* being *shucked* or *cocked*, Sir Alex recommends we view another *positive way in which those neglected by society are able to*

properly, respectfully, legally express their feelings towards 'living in a society' …

The person who is the master and controller of *this* fantasy is someone who obviously would've been called a bunch of awful names by people during his high school days, with the fact we're sitting in what looks to be the adult version of a high school theatre, gum stuck underneath the seats and all, and the banner NO PLACE FOR HATE hanging over the stage with the auditorium equipped to rationally handle maybe 150, 200 people. However, dressed in what is essentially a Nazi uniform, except teal blue instead of red with a woman named MS. PRINCIPAL according to her nametag, with an armband with a heart and cupid's arrow on it, *this* depraved fantasy is about *prom!* "Would the most desirables please begin the process of selection?" She says, and at this, a series of utterly dashing automatrons in their prom dresses begin asking *everyone* except the protagonist of this fantasy to, Sadie Hawkins style, go to the big dance with them! In my own eyelids, I can follow the pulsing gaze of this dejected, untouchable-feeling person with his premature baldness and his wandering eyes, with, the same way as we saw in Hans Karls', parents being able to monitor the selections of their offspring, despite their own legal age in this cocktail of revenge, so that they select properly, with them essentially ensuring that the most desirable, the top 10s on the academic lists, the football quarterbacks, the Ivy League prospects, the Nobel prize families, are paired with their daughters due to the process of oversight, selection, and the fact if the armbands were red this would be seen as awful and obscene, but in this guy's recollection turned animation, its all just *natural … pairing*, yes, *pairing*, let's go with that, intelligently designed … choices. "Now, watch what *we* allow him to do," Rajesh says, as the subject clicks a button, and at this, literal, actual invisible wires, barely visible through squinting like a spider's web reflecting in lamplight, and when the controller clicks a button, the emotions and expressions and direction, the voice pitches and body leans of the young women in the dresses, *shifts* towards *him* as if *magnetized* … one who was talking to a jocular jawed, letterman's jacket donning linebacker type sashays her way over to our subject in his seated predisposition and mostly silent gleam, and as she starts flattering his (in her *totally natural* evaluation) *superior intellect* and *sigma calm*, the principal in the happy armband and Hitler moustache comes I-just-got-rejected-from-art-school stomping over the inexplicably sticky carpet, places her hands behind her back, and leers down her short, beaklike nose with a squint at the fact this woman is talking to the kid. Like every rejected first draft of a compulsively written savior novel ever, as the principal starts asking both the daughter and her baffled parents whether she'd been *consuming any substances underage this morning* at her choosing of our *overlooked Chad*, the wires whip down from the ceiling, and at a flick of the pilot's wrist, the principal goes ragdoll-physics careening towards the stage, smacks her Hitler moustache *on the chorus risers*, and

G-Mod style rolls over underneath the banner until she smacks her completely rubber body into the *Sound of Music* high school directed, apprentice crafted green scenery placards holding up the wall behind the stage. *This* 'fuck you' to authority has caused the damsel in distress to manic-pixie *flutter* with a swooning breath and both her thin wrists over her chest, and I'm half expecting cottage cheese to burst out of her mouth like an avalanche when she says *our HERO* to our protagonist, who cracks a smile and is pecked on the cheek by the woman and then lifted onto the firm shoulders of his classmates while the cheerleaders all argue who gets to be taken home by him on the night of the dance, for homecoming or Prom, and it's their voices echoing in my eardrums in their fake, forced, programmed, unreal *glee* at the power fantasy that make me tell Sir Alex, "I need to sit down."

"Duncan, you *are* sitting down."

"My *chair* needs to sit down, then."

"What's wrong with it, can't *everyone* have a little fun with something that's *real* to them?"

"Yes, but *no*, Sir Alex," I say, removing my headset and placing my palms directly into my eyes until they sparkle and refract with more colors than a kaleidoscope as I put a toe into the metal bucket, causing it to rattle across the floor and for the supervisors to startle like offensive linemen getting *flagged*, emphasis on the *offensive.* "It's … it's *real* to *them*."

"Yes, but is it *really* real?" Rajesh asks. I want to take the manager and throw him into the ceiling worse than the bad bad principal got yeeted into the backdrop, because *this* is the argument that would be drug out in courts, probably reach the fucking Supremes, and eventually have the decision returned that as long as the nuke lands in the middle of a façade replicating a neighborhood with no people in it, the uranium poisoning leaking into the water supply is a tragedy of the commons, and Sir Alex is already asking me *would you rather have them uncontrolled and roaming the streets*, and that's when my eyes settle on a screen that has a very familiar, almost too much so, 19 year old sitting in one of those headsets with a stupid smile across his face, probably smelling like Old Spice and post-lonely-existence afterbirth.

"I need to see *that* one," I say, pointing at Hans Karl, but Rajesh is shaking his head no.

"Conflict of interest," he argues, but Sir Alex holds up a palm.

"Well, let's hold on, Rajesh, the point of this is to mitigate potential violence, is it not?"

"What violence?" Rajesh asks, opening his palms. "Hans Karl Lieber, the young master himself, is one of the most polite, agreeable, complacent, friendly faces ever to enter this club! If I'm being honest, I'm not even sure why he's *here*."

"I can take a guess," I say, sighing, ready to put the Spectacle back over my eyes. "Something tells me he hasn't had a whole lot of success in the woman department at his age."

“With how much of a cunt his mother was,” Sir Alex says, scoffing. “I actually *met* her. If she were alive, she’d have fought the kid’s girlfriend for not hugging him correctly!”

“You’d better prepare yourself,” Rajesh says, his unease turning to glee. “Kid’s got an *imagination* on his shoulders.”

Yes, I think, clenching my neck muscles like I’m about to dive into a freezing pool, with bits of ice already thickening the water. *And it’s when that imagination crosses over into places other people* share *that very bad things can happen, according to our history …*

Hans Karl is using the facilities. The bathroom is square, no bigger than a toll booth, with an ornate, granite countertop smelling vaguely of hairspray and with tooth brushes caked by grime, their bristled hardened and off-white, the quarter wall, rectangular mirror above the sink with its ornate glass handles itself flecked by residue from spitting. The ceiling fan above, with bits of black clogged from what must’ve been Mother’s cigarettes, attempts to suck the air from where Hans Karl is straining on the toilet bowl, but basically sounds like a muffler detached and dragging on the ground. The window to his right, showing the sparse backyard on a cool fall day, gray light falling onto the dead leaves, is high enough to where he can peer out the window and have his heavyset bottomside, covered in a white t-shirt almost like a ghost’s drapery, thin and blotched dark with sweat, covered sufficiently. Basically, in simple terms, it’s not coming out. Hans Karl pushes, his neck vibrating, his bare feet flat on the tile floor near the rug, and he pants after a few more seconds, feeling the blood in his ears and the rush of it from the pressure as though he’s underwater for a couple seconds, and still, the cigar is stuck to *nope*. He strains again, pushing, and this time, when he presses his lower body into the toilet from above, water itself, not dirty but also unclean in the way the pipes rusting might be, begins *seeping* from the bottom of the toilet around his ankles, *into* the carpet itself already folded up, with its rubber underside turned upward and pressed into the wood of the four drawer, smooth oak counter. *Shit!* He says, more of a command than explanation, and as he gears up to strain again, the base of his neck pulsing in an unnatural way to the rhythm of his heart, at once, there’s four knocks on the door. “Sweetie?” His mother asks. “Did you fall in? It’s been twenty minutes!”

“No, mom!” Hans Karl shouts. “I forgot to take my MiraLax!”

“Awwww, drat!” Mother says, like some maternal Stasi ensuring the physics of toilet bowels haven’t changed. “I have to get Timmy to training!”

“Jesus fucking *Christ*,” Hans Karl says, flushing the empty toilet just to get her to shut the fuck up and leave him alone for once in his young life. “I’ll be out in a moment!”

“Sounds good, holler if you need anything!” He remembers, at a strangely old age, having to his mother and father to wipe him in the bathroom at a home improvement store, with his father rapping on the stall door and the toilet paper placed under his cheeks doing nothing to stop the

feeling of invasion, the crawling sense that the throne he sat upon was a vile taunt. He steels himself, practically gripping the granite countertop, the water's seeping from the calking-needed intersection of the toilet base and the floor directly proportional to his straining, and, closing his eyes and thinking of absolutely nothing but the blankness of his eyelids and the fact the strombolis and cupcakes, the entire box of TastyPies he ate just to feed the rush of his animal brain the same way he does, sometimes, on this very toilet in *other* ways just so Mother won't have a baby monitor to overhear what he's doing, something *his*, Hans Karl pushes with *all* his might, his face scrunching, his neck veins popping, practically ready for the place they sutured his head together at a time immemorial, yet somehow remembered by his body, to pop open in a grotesque comedy, and finally, with a cross between a victory exclamation and a needed sigh to relieve the pressure, the natural process *finally* completes itself. He stands up, looks down, and mutters *fuck*: he might be into art, but Hans Karl isn't stupid, this fucking thing is going to cause issues, and he makes sure the toilet plunger is armed next to the basin in the way his parents told him before sitting back down and pressing the flush button while praying. Due to the presence or absence of a God, the thing does indeed go down the toilet; however, when Hans Karl wipes, and then checks the paper, he sees what he's seen since his parents began feeding him and called the extra weight *big bones for a big boy who is growing, have another plate!* Bright red, surface level, actual *blood*, *another* fissure the product of the fact his parents love their son so much they could just feed him until he *bursts*, because there is, in his Mother's echoing, remembered voice, *no such thing as too much 'LOVE!'*

Cursing, knowing it will heal and hating it anyway, since everything bad that happens is 'his fault' since the age of 8, Hans Karl cleans himself, flushes the toilet again, partially slow to respond with its gurgles, washes his hands, avoids looking in the mirror at all costs, closes the drapes with a quick slide behind him, unlocks the door his mother rapped on, and finds his mother with the robot already ready to go: Timmy, his friend, dressed perfectly, pristinely, preppily, his unscarred head and contact-ready body for the fitness training and evolution of their societal capacity through playing kickball, baseball, etcetera, where there will be no penalties and all. His mother, dressed in her usual hairspray and black jacket attire, waves at him happily, and tells him, when hugging her goodbye for the afternoon, to *squeeze her harder*, so he does. Then, as she reminds him to be careful, to not engage with strangers on the internet, and leads the perfect little TimmyBot down the sidewalk, to the car, and out the stairs, Hans Karl materializes a paintball gun in his hand. He opens a glass patterned door leading to the back of the house, the same one I and Leo walked through, opens the door to the new basement, the musty scent familiar to him, and there, in the basement, are a bunch of placards of robots themselves, looking *exactly* like the TommyBot, some of the automatrons, even, and when he cocks the paintball shotgun against the dusted, forgotten, Rubbermaid containers of the Lieber family heirlooms, trophies rotting in

apathy, he's completely silent, yet pats the back of his wide-wasted boxer shorts to make sure he's intact, and as I take the headset off with the sound still playing of the paintballs whacking into the placards, I turn away from the bucket, stand up by myself, tell Sir Alex and Rajesh thank you, and explain we'll be back the following day to discuss our results but that they, in this sense, are good to go for the moment, and when Sir Alex asks if I'm sure I don't need the bucket, I tell him I don't, because in reality, where we are now, there's no amount of vomit, blood, or excretement to truly encapsulate the way that kid must've felt behind that face chiseled into immobility by nature, nurture, and the feeling of constriction, invasion in a place so barren, those paintballs slaps probably echoed like fat, exploding raindrops outside the faded, cracked panels of that hollowed out house …

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SUBJECT: Lieber, Hans Karl
OBSERVATION TIMELINE: Entire Day, measuring for volatility, evaluating tendencies
OBSERVERS: Chausser, Duncan L, and Braise
CALCULATE TRAUMA INDEX (Trauma Impact Index, TII)
BEGIN SCANNING:
The kid and his mother, presumably, are walking hand in hand in an outdoor, European Agora style market. The highways, paved blacktop with yellow single lines dividing the roads, are the kinds only country people would call *highways*. State route style, with each pocket on the side being populated by an adult version of a lemonade stand versus a house, not dissimilar to the job fair the kid had analyzed the previous time. The manager, presumably, is an overweight, blasé, balding white dude in his 30s who is eating a plastic tub that just *smells* of freezerburn more than his Old Spice aftershave, and he points to the hand-in-hand Hans Karl Lieber and Mother and chews his plastic fork so hard one of the spit points breaks. He pushes his glasses up his nose, already raw on the one side, and says to them, "See?" He turns around to the flatscreen, pointing his fork at it. "Health care … *market!*"

"We know," Hans Karl says, dressed in a depressingly gray and blue hoodie, like Penn State's stadium empty after a loss. His mother, meanwhile, shrinks next to her son's frame like a sidepiece on a wedding cake if she weren't the woman who gave birth to him, and even since she still is, she cracks a weak smile. The jubialant joy and anxiety propelled springiness she showed before, the way she whipped around the plaza with a cigarette in her hand on the practice date, is gone; instead, there's a haze to her eyes and a sinking of her skin on her cheeks that betrays whatever projected front she's showing, and she smells of Marlboros without the hairspray or the perfume to cover it up in a way that before never would've left the door.

“What do you got?” The manager asks, sticking his dejected, jagged fork stem aside, brittle as one of Mother’s bones.

“Cancer,” she says, weakly. “Stage four.”

“Oof,” the manager says, turning his head around at the line of people dressed in hospital scrubs, wife beaters not dissimilar to Mother’s under her flannel and her jacket. “We should be able to get you in so long as you’ve got the money.”

“It’s not a question of money,” Hans Karl says, blankly, reciting a fact he learned in science. “It’s a question of will.”

“Oh, well in that case,” the manager says, turning his wheely chair over the pavement into the block of stands ever so slightly. “Go right that way!” He points down a line, and the Liebers, arm and arm like a supporter in the waiting room too busy playing chess to hold his wife’s hand, walk that way. From the stands, behind rows of orange pill bottles, a man screams, CANCER PILLS! HALF PRICE! GET YOUR CHEMO, LIFE SAVING DISCOUNTS! Smacking a bell next to him like something out of Monty Python’s ICU. At another stand, meant to look like an ambulance back opened up and stationary, a woman dressed in blue scrubs with a mosaic face and a man dressed as an EMT with the same blurred, slightly moving neck and up shouts at them as they pass, arm and arm, “AMBULANCE, THREE HUNDRED OFF! MULTI-TRIP DISCOUNT, ONE WAY, TWO TIMES, GET A QUARTER BACK!” They round a bend past a classroom of bald headed, bright eyed, bushy tailed preschool age kids all with bald heads being handed bright, curvy fonts with kids who look like them on the cover with the titles SURVIVING CANCER THROUGH THE POWER OF FRIENDSHIP! And RADIATION DOESN’T HAVE TO BURN YOU OUT! as their parents consult hooded, masked figures, watchers from a fallen angel’s field, explaining the ratio of life to debt, responsibilities, and the like. As they get to the end of the walking path, circling towards the front, Mother bends a dry mouth with unbrushed teeth for the first time in 40 years from the cancer smoking and says to Hans Karl, “Honey, I’m just *tired*. And your father still isn’t coming home …” the words are lost into the cold win, and the din of the fair, the swiping of cards, the jangling of money, mixes with a perplexed look on Hans Karl’s face as he beholds the cross around her neck and swallows whatever else he wanted to say with a look fit for a puppy who knows it’s owner’s got something dark, black, and sinister just inches underneath that skin, something that doesn’t even need a name thanks to that one *smell* …

“Ooooookay,” Braise says, punching notes on his keypad the old fashioned way as the two of us continue watching Hans Karl in the room next door, the therapist, Christine, guiding the brain wave reader and

allowing us the room to watch the action. “Pretty straightforward: mom dies from cancer during the parents’ divorce, kid’s overactive imagination at being the stand-in husband has him feeling like everybody gave up.”

“Yikes,” I say, my hands folded over the desk, sighing and staring at him in the trance-like state in the folding chair. “It’s like walking through a horror film on psychedelics.”

“Funny you mention that,” Braise says, redirecting his attention to the monitor with a flick of his chin. “Look at *this*.”

Hans Karl, 18, loads into the IDEAL SELF application on his Spectacle: first, let’s take away the scars on that head, the program assistant recommends in the CHARACTER CORRECT screen. And let’s shave a few (okay, several, but we’re being nice) pounds off that stretch marked wasteline. Oh, and let’s curve out those arches in the feet that made the inserts, too, you *never* know what a partner is into nowadays – hiking, running, biking, the works. Let’s also straighten those teeth out, add a couple inches in a couple places that are *super* important to *some* women, aaaaaaand let’s make sure the ass doesn’t do the leakage thing from however it healed when they had to put fluids up there in your infancy. Speaking of *that*, let’s correct the curving of the fingertips that was caused by smoking in the womb, aaaaaaand let’s make that one toe just a *little* shorter … okay, how’s that, user HKiller42069?

“It’s decent,” Hans Karl says. “Still don’t like it. Can’t say why.”

“No worries,” the automated stylist assistant says. “Oh, and let’s give you a bit more hair on the backside, we’re going for *blonde Elvis without the heart attack!*”

Following his tune-up of everything, Hans Karl wonders, if the similarly sculpted people he’s passing in the cocktail lounge, with the elevated schools and the string-based music, would want to trademark his head if they could see it’s curved healing. *Everything distinct is either hated or loved*, his former, human therapist said, and as he gets to his high top table and meets his date, a woman with curly hair down to her shoulders over a thin, black leather jacket with a silver, circular amulet in the center of her collarbone, her lilac perfume reminding him of nothing, thank god, and her brown eyes reminding him slightly of his mother, now dead just long enough for him to remember her as *always* having cancer, like a CD stuck on a certain track in his dreams, he pulls the chair across the floor, sits down on the slightly rough bottom, and does his best to smile with his curve and gap corrected teeth.

“Good evening!” He says, sounding like a football manager who just learned English despite Hans Karl himself speaking only one language.

“Hi there,” the woman says, still just typing on her phone with black fingernails. Her face is softer than in the online pictures, sculpted, in the same way he’s used to and which the magazines deemed perfect long before now. She flashes a quick smile, with her display name, MARGARET, replacing whatever screenname must be on the app that’s flying across her phone screen with those messages. “You’re perfect in person!” she says, flashing a quick smile and a bemused voice.

“You too,” Hans Karl says, with suggestions spamming in his ears for how to interact: TELL HER SHE LOOKS NICE! TALK ABOUT THE WEATHER! ASK HER HOW HER DAY WAS IRL!

Before he can do so, however, the waiter, in his black tuxedo and spotless white pants, walks his way over and interrupts them with a tray in his hand. “Good evening, romantics!” he says, in a bassy voice. “What simulated drinks can I get you both?”

“I’ll go for a Martini,” Margaret says, still tapping away on her phone. “And you, Hans?”

“Uhhhhh,” Hans Karl says, as the corrector in his ear screams, *DO NOT STUTTER, USE LESS PAUSES, BE MORE ASSERTIVE!* “I’ll have a white Russian?”

“My *dude!*” the waiter says, clicking his just-for-show pen again after writing nothing. “Make sure to take 15 minutes after consuming the data before operating any machinery, and by your presence here at Elevation, you’re consenting to having your activity scrutinized to the fullest extent of the law if *any* of your actions result in adverse consequences, as explained fully in the terms and conditions.”

“Psssssh,” Margaret says, rolling her eyes. “I agreed to *those!*”

“Same,” Hans Karl says, nodding awkwardly. *At least with the metal already being in his head, it was easier to find a place to implant the microchip*. The waiter fucks off towards the bar, and the woman gives another pleasant smile while continuing to IM, which Hans Karl immediately finds strange, according to the T part of the monitored memory, because she’s dressed as though she should have an implant to do that *without* using her fingers. Hans Karl wants to ask, *can I get your digits*, but before he can, the instantaneous alcohol delivery known as 100 TBPS optics comes back as the waiter with the low cut, fat glass for the white Russian, and the Martini glass for his date, whose black, pointed boots are tapping on the leg of the table underneath them with the slightest of hollow ringing noises.

“Anything else I can do to make the *perfect* atmosphere for both of you?”

“Sure,” Margaret says, putting down her phone just for a moment. “Could we get some aperitifs, maybe a cheese and olive tray?”

“We have a delectable cheese assortment immediately downloadable to your stomach nerves,” the waiter says, flicking his eyes to use the implanted retina display with nary a muscular movement. “Are you guys paying together or separate?”

“Uhhhhhm,” Hans Karl says. “I’ll get it!”

“No,” Margaret says, looking at him with a scrunch of her thin eyebrows. “We’ll split it!”

“Oh dang,” The waiter says, bumping his arm on Hans Karl’s suit. “You’re a lucky man!”

“He sure is,” Margaret says, blessedly not mentioning the fact there may have been some strings pulled in a way nobody needs to see to even get her at the table. “What do you do for work?” she asks, raising her glass as the waiter turns on his heel and happily moves to the next table.

“I’m an artist,” Hans Karl says, picking up his white Russian simulated and blessing the universe for lowering the drinking age with parental endorsement, so long as it *stays in the brain and on the mainframe*.

“What do you make?” She asks, tilting her head to the side.

“Worlds,” he says, thinking to the metaversal building blocks, moving like street pieces in *Inception* at the flick of his wrist, and how the computer copying Da Vinci’s perfect sequences made him feel like his father must’ve sitting on *Minecraft* after school while a team of engineers built a robot in the next room. “There’s hopefully some use for them.”

“There always is,” Margaret says, the light from the half moon lamp above them catching her eyes in a way so natural it flips Hans Karl’s stomach like stepping outside after the whole day in an office. “To *genuine* connection!”

“Cheers to that!” Hans Karl says, clinking the glasses together. Then, right as they finish the sips, with her taking a bit more than him, they put them back down the table as a popping sound outside echoes against the window like a Roman candle let loose on the street, horizontally. The immediate vodka and liquor simulated hum, *allowing him to practice before the real thing and learn the dangers under supervision, ALWAYS*, along with the gymnastics of his stomach from her eyes, plus the only slightly muted howls and screams, echoing pops of terror from the street beside them push Hans Karl into what feels like a mushroom experience from the sorts of kitchens only allowed in Denver, not PA, but Margaret continues typing on her phone with hardly a blasé glance through the plate glass next to them.

“Uhm,” Hans Karl says, shifting in his seat. “Was there a shooting forecasted for today?”

“Oh, yeah, I checked the app earlier,” Margaret says, coughing twice, quickly, and giving him a disappointed look that reminds him, infuriatingly, of his mother looking at him over a report card in a way he can’t detach,

can’t use nuance to rectify. “This one’s apparently one of those psychotic loner-types, he’ll be nullified in fifteen minutes.”

“What category is he?”

“Four,” she says, taking another sip of the Martini. “It’s the holidays, the rates are so much *higher* at this time.”

The echoing gunshots outside, plus the sirens, don’t even rattle the bulletproof glass in the windows as the guy, white, presumably, goes on screaming something about WE HAVE LOST OUR PATH AND MUST BE SAVED, whatever Tommy gun or multi-round uzi he ported onto the server firing like a demented accompaniment to him shouting THE OBAMAS COULD’VE STOPPED 9/11 and GOD IS READY TO UPLOAD AT ALL TIMES. The wild-eyed, drugged out, semi-slouching bump-stocking troll is immediately kickbanned by a sniper bullet from the roof slicing through his cranium as he gets near the window, and his green and red suit, like Santa’s rejected color scheme and/or his hearse attire, lays in a shadow on the sidewalk as the round went straight into the pavement underneath him. The blood splatters up to the window the same way as rain from a passing car’s tire whisking through a puddle, and Hans Karl uses his strange fingers, too straight, with nails, to pull at his collar like he’s clearing a cord from his neck before the whole thing went cordless, chipped.

“So,” Margaret says, as unfazed as listening to rain and with her glass already half drained. “Wanna follow me on Extasy?”

“Obvious social awkwardness,” Braise says, the cigar in his hands being blown towards the ceiling vent. “No idea what *normal* is.”

“How could he have known?” I ask, ready to pound my fist into my forehead. “And they thought it was part of his *personality*?”

“I’ve heard of a lot of stupid shit,” Braise says. “But ‘we broke my kid’s brain by allowing him to fall while watching him and by arguing in front of him like two Shakespearean rejects and then blamed *him* for the brain scarring after reversing organ failure’ is right up there with ‘we feed our toddlers alcohol to get them started early.’”

I sit up straight in my leather chair, watching the brain waves change. “Did he … is he …”

“What?” Braise asks, coming back down to earth and leaning next to me. “Oh god, he’s …”

“Yup,” I say. “He’s *asleep*.”

“What time of night did he say he stays up until?”

“Like, between 1 and 2:00am.”

“And they’re *still* starting school at 6,” Braise says. “I’m not a mathematician, but that can’t be ideal.”

“Look at this,” I say, pointing at the imager. “What is *happening* in there?”

There’s a massive roof party going on with strobe lights shooting out across a city that could be Manhattan; lord *knows* how much they pay to connect there for the whole evening. However, instead of it being a bunch of 20 somethings in Gucci and Dolce, these people are dressed in *animal* costumes. We’ve got red wolves and blue bunnies, orange snapping lizards descending from velociraptors, literal, actual purple wombats and triceratops wandering around, and finally, in the center of it, *there* is Hans Karl: with his nail talons aloft, his tuxedo barely covering his chest like the rodentia Great Gatsby, he raises a portable drinking water bottle usually affixed to the cage walls in his hands, filled with either water or vodka in the smell-absent expanse, and he declares, in a booming voice all the grinding fur-people can hear, “FUCK THE PIG!” Except, when it echoes, it’s in his *father*, Gerald’s, voice. Everyone there howls in unison as though the moon has awakened an unremembered part of humanity, if only for a moment, and Piggums, in his misshapen head and toe twisted glory, is lifted onto the shoulders by the rabbit DJ from Euphoria and an army of rave-bumping, street rapping partygoers and thrust into the rooftop pool, where a bunch of curvy foxes, voluptuous seagulls, and what I can only ungodly describe as Braise fucking *chokes* next to me as SEXY DUCKS, SO MUCH BREAST THERE’S NOT ENOUGH SAUCE TO COVER THEM ON THE TABLE all FLOCK to Hans Karl’s Piggums, who is drenched wet in the water and going ENNNNYHHHH, ENNNNNNYHHHH, ENNNNNNYYYYYYYH –

HOWEVER

No matter what he does, as the water around him starts *cold boiling*, the chlorine mixing with the tobacco and weed flavored air, he can’t seem to *perform* in front of such an audience, so instead, he tilts his own mouth towards the fire red moon and curses across the city expanse, “PIG THE FUCK? PIG THE FUCK?” as *everyone* claps their animaly hands, scales and pads and nails and paws, louder than the standing ovation for the graduation speaker; “PIG THE FUCK, PIG THE FU-”

“*Stop!*”

The last thing on the screen, as Christine sits in the corner with her arms crossed, her eyes already wet in a way the last therapist couldn’t’ve been, was not programmed to *be*, is a viewable sequence of Hans Karl, in the Ideal Self application, sitting across the table from the Margaret woman trying to think in *song snippets* to send her messages, with *and the voices in your brain* from some hard rock song being the thing he’s thinking of amidst the pounding music and the coiling tendrils of smoke, before he looks at her again with a passing glimpse and the chorus to *Brown Eyed Girl* plays with

the *dun dun dun, da dun, do da, dun dun dun!* lost to the simple yearning of the words, his goal trapped in perpetuity. Hans Karl sits straight up, hides his midsection in a too-noticeable shifting of his legs, and beholds us as though we've just barged into his room at home.

"What's going on?" He asks, as Christine beholds him with a sorrowful, downcast gaze, and Braise and I, still standing, share a glance.

"We …" I say.

"We need to talk to your father," Braise declares. Hans Karl's eyes narrow, and he looks down at the comfy, cliché sofa turned into a dreambed portal to hell. "He's still your emergency contact, is he not?"

"Yes," Hans Karl says. "I've been living with him since moving home from school."

"You dropped out?" Christine asks, regaining her composure and making sure her blaiser isn't droplet stained. "And you didn't tell me?"

"You can see my *thoughts*," Hans Karl says, curtly. "I was spending all my time in the Metaverse, anyway."

"Alright," I say, with Braise's crossed arms and *what the hell* face befitting a coach who just watched a player score a touchdown against themselves by running the wrong way. "So you're alright with your father hearing your results?"

"Sure," Hans Karl says. "Show him the 'collateral damage' report."

Gerald calls out of the first round of a chess tournament in the basement of a church to meet with us. He specifically asks, "I want to be able to speak openly and freely with you, and I would prefer if *he*," he says the word like a jab, referring to his son. "Weren't here for it."

"But it's *his* treatment."

"I know that, but he and I have some fundamental disagreements about some things."

We accepted his request, solely because it was Gerald's signature that allowed him to explore the metaversal dating scene with the technological enhancements, seeing as, in his words, "it would show the kid how dangerous the real thing is while I still can see him." Braise and I, in preparing the Automated Treatment Report of the Trauma Indication Index, and getting the goddamn printer to print despite no color cartridge in the whole office, are somewhat relieved, in our evaluation, that Mr. Lieber is finally coming around to the idea that maybe allowing his son unmoderated access to the internet, to *be* his connection, while brain-raping him, metaphorically, since time immemorial is a bad idea … however, when Gerald shows up, with fucking *Tabitha* in tow, wearing a suit jacket over a PAWN KING t-shirt in the word art fashion of his chess club which he must've paid *actual* money for, with a depiction of Gerald himself lording over a chessboard worse than Sir Alex on a *bet*, along with normal-guy

jeans and Reebok dad sneakers, he seems offended that his new bride can't have access as well. When we inform him, however, that Tabitha should stay in the waiting room, he says, "I already had the automatron stay in the *car*."

My mouth drops open. "You … you brought the robot of his *mother* to the *therapy* session along with your *new partner*?"

"Shhhhhh," Gerald says, placing an unindented ring finger to his lips. "They don't like being compared to my ex wife."

Mother fucker, Braise says, in the group chat on our phones, typing it and sending it directly in front of Mr. Lieber's face. Leo, meanwhile, who took a day off prior to *tomorrow's observation*, sends a video of an elephant shitting into a children's pool, seeing as he's listening to his Latin music in a state of consciousness different from ours four states up and over and yet can still smell Gerald's logic from *there*, apparently.

"Why don't they like being compared?" Braise asks, with an upturned smirk.

"Because," he leans in and whispers to us. "I actually *loved* her."

"Ahhhhh," Braise says, as we share a *holy shit* glimpse as I see Tabitha with her arms crossed reading the details of the THERAPAL application listed on the wall. "Perhaps Tabitha would like to engage in some treatment?"

"Let's do one thing at a time," Gerald says. "May I see my son's report?"

ERROR LOG REPORT FOR: Tommy, Automaton Psychology Version, Master's Level, BOT (Biologically Oriented Therapist) Number 1031333
RESULT: Hallucination resulting in incorrect recommendation for subject to kill self.
CORRECTION: Automaton self-annihilated in order to protect integrity of subject's life, professional integrity. Self-destruction completed successfully, minimal damage to office, no physical damage to subject, subject seemed surprised, but not distressed nor shocked. Supervising persons immediately contacted for rectification.
ANALYSIS: Subject (Hans Karl Lieber, age 19) presents with a brain previously before unencountered by treatment processes. Subject experienced epidural hematoma resulting in organ failure at the age of 10 months old while underneath parental supervision. CPS interview resulted in no criminal actions. Life saving surgery performed by Dr. Antonio Gaspar, leading biological pediatric neurosurgeon, at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia; unfortunately, craniotomy performed with expertise near to one hundred percent, mathematically infallible, but location of aneurysm required intracranial incisions on the right posterior frontal and parietal lobe regions of subject's brain. According to subject, and referenced in

medical reports from Pennsylvania Medicine, injury misunderstood by parents to be subdural hematoma, intracranial incisions and post-surgical alterations as determined by magnetic resonance imaging heretofore unaddressed in a professional atmosphere. Due to altered brain and unique nature of injury, extremely vivid, precise memory and subconscious resulted in Tommy brain circuits encountering unusually bold lines of code, essentially, resulting in overload necessitating a level of human operational intervention heretofore unexpected, resulting in error. Combination of physical, mental, emotional abuse from responsible parties and neglectful misunderstanding of true medical situation, combined with frontal and parietal lobe implications on emotional regulation, behavior, higher level functioning and artistic energy overloading Tommy's circuits resulted in unanticipated hallucination requiring properly executed corrective measures.
RECOMMENDATIONS: Please ensure the proper physiological nature of all subjects is accurately and properly reported and taken into account prior to treatment; next Automaton should be fully aware of the unique nature of post-traumatic brain injury healing and complex nature of denial and resultant trauma prior to treatment.

Mr. Lieber scans the report up and down, turns the paper over to the backside, his steaming cup of hot water that he asked for sitting in front of him with the *LIVE, LAUGH, LOBE CARE* brain picture promoting CONSTANT REHABILITATION! Right in front of him. He scans it, holds it up to the light to see through it, and then regards both of us with a quizzical look, as though we've just tossed a live rodent into the middle of his chessboard.

"My wife and I thought that subdural hematomas were *worse* than epidural hematomas, is that not correct?"

"Ask *him*," I say. We've beamed in one of the team doctors, dude who used to work for the Eagles as a cranial consultant, who is responding on a live chat on his lunch break. Authoritatively, Dr. Rauch states that generalities are bad for brain injuries because all brains heal differently, and in the case of an infant with organ failure and an estimated time near death of within an hour on operation day, the grotesque and nearly fatal nature of the injury combined with the involvement of an artery causing pressure on the infant's skull, including the need for intracranial incisions causing distinct alterations in the brain as necessitated to *reach* the artery, reading Dr. Gaspar's reports word for word is utterly necessary to understand the situation.

“Here’s what I don’t understand,” Mr. Lieber says, reacting as if we just told him the price of a used car versus the true, medical nature of his son’s brain. “Why is there no mention of *marijuana* in this report?”

“You let your infant *toke*?” Braise asks, sitting straight up in his chair.

“No, no,” Mr. Lieber says, turning around and huffing like a cold horse blowing a fly from his nose in the door towards the waiting area. “See, this is why I wanted to talk to you *personally*. My son has a habit of *misrepresenting his situation* to *professionals*.”

“Are you not the ones who told your son he had a subdural hematoma and not an epidural hematoma?”

“Yes, but what? He’s 19! He can’t let his parents’ actions define his life *forever!*”

Braise raises his eyebrows and seems to pinch himself to ensure he isn’t dreaming. Mr. Lieber continues, with a playful, sick smile, “He was raging at me over the difference between psychology and physiology; what’s it really *matter*?”

“Where did you go to school?” Braise asks him.

“The University of Pennsylvania,” Mr. Lieber says, sitting up straight in his chair like he just checkmated us, or something, with a smug grin.

“And you’re telling me they let you graduate?” Braise asks again. “I’m not even a neuroscientist and I can tell you there’s a pretty large difference.”

Mr. Lieber actually *shrugs*. “I had him meet virtually with the same therapist who helped him get over his mother’s death, who tactfully explained that the word ‘should’ is *bad*.”

“What … what does that have to do with the implications of the brain injury?”

“Hey,” Mr. Lieber says. “At least he isn’t *dead*!”

“Which is honestly surprising, considering his parents,” Braise says, and *that* causes Mr. Lieber to sit back in his chair, the Ken of all Karens suddenly saying, “Well, who are the two of *you* to judge?”

Dr. Rauch types in the chat, *physiology determines the psychological outcomes of brains; if there is an abnormal physiology, in this case as the result of healing from a nearly fatal brain injury and the necessary surgery incurred in infancy, the psychological outcomes involving the right posterior frontal and parietal lobe regions, by scientific law, are impacted to some degree. Typically, marijuana or digital, simulated usage of marijuana would not result in the same outcomes, especially when such derivations from normality are viewed while sober*.

“Bullshit!” Mr. Lieber says. “Who is *that* guy to tell me how to *raise* my *son?*”

Dr. Rauch types, *PennMed ‘24*

Mr. Lieber shakes his head, his neck reddening, his suit jacket arms crossing, frumping at the elbows. “You guys are the ones who allow people to run around in *brothels*.

“I smell parental negligence,” Braise says, kicking his shoes underneath the table. “You’d better be happy for the statute of limitations, or something.”

“Do people copulate in those places my son’s been frequenting?”

“Depends,” I say. “What’s your definition of copulation?”

“We’ve been through this,” Braise says. “If you want to come and smoke a dart in a place where people like your robo-wife come to party, be our guest.”

“Wait,” Mr. Lieber says, narrowing his eyes again. “You’re telling me people *smoke* there?”

“Cigarettes and cigarillos,” Braise says. “Did a stoner bully you in school, Mr. Lieber?”

“Ah,” he says, nodding, as he pushes his son’s file back towards us across the table. “Hans Karl didn’t mention *that* part. Don’t you think a kid whose mother died from lung cancer shouldn’t be frequenting an establishment with so much secondhand?”

“I’ve thought a lot of things, recently,” I say. “And I hate to be the one to inform you that we don’t believe your son is … how should I put this … necessarily *upset* that his mother passed.”

“It’s like I told him,” Gerald says, smiling in a resigned way, like he knows his opponent’s next move. “He’d want her alive, just on a different planet.” He sits up in his chair, *sniffs* the slightly steaming water, and then says, “Tell you what: all this brain stuff is well and good, but so long as my son is spending *my* money, *I* don’t want him going to a place where people *smoke*. Is it within my legal right to make that distinction?”

“Of course,” Braise says. “So you’re sorta cool with everything he’s been doing in the metaverse, on the internet?”

“Hey,” Gerald says, taking out his wallet and examining his credit card, then tapping his phone’s screen with his bare ring finger. “That’s connection, nowadays.” He stands, offering his hand to both of us, and says, “Thank you for your care and attention towards my family. I’ll be sure the kid gets himself here on time next week.”

“Thank you for your continued cooperation, Mr. Lieber,” I say, as Braise shakes his head and mouths *what the fuck* as Mr. Lieber leaves the room, leaving the door cracked and greeting Tabitha with a slight wave. *If someone had asked that question about physiology and psychology in my 101 they’d be failed on the spot btw*, Dr. Rauch types before typing *glhf ttys* and disconnecting. When I look at Braise, we’re like two captains on a ship caught in a storm where the sky is cracked by lightning, the horizon

looming with the sense of the shore we were supposed to reach caught in the grip of thrashing waves …

31:

In my dream, Leo and I are following Hans Karl dressed in a trenchoat and bowler hat which his father would never have let him out of the house wearing down a long tunnel with only a bit of gray light at the end of it. He enters two mahogany doors which swing open on creaking, rusted hinges into what must be a church, entering into a standing ovation, as the run of the mill, billboard stolen founder of AutoMetrics, George Borne, billionaire philanthropist, announces to the black ties that anyone who buys a P.E.T.-D.™ (partially electronic trained-domestic) will receive not only a friend for the entirety of their child's lives, but that the dog or cat or bird or snake or guinea pig (Jesus *Christ*) will be able to "allow the automaton and its forward compatible software versions to even outlive some of *them* who chose not to be uploaded into the furthering of human eternity!" This causes a raucous amount of glasses clinking, hands clapping, except for Hans Karl walking straight through the crowd as we *Birdman* style follow him over his shoulder and he walks up the stairs with an electrical cord used for charging an old version of the spectacle and wraps it around the young CEO-founder's neck while both of them laugh together, the CEO's eyes rolling back in his head as Hans Karl gleefully pulls, scrunching his face together like he's on the golden throne and shouting MY DOG DIDN'T *GET* TO LIVE! … after, my dream switches to me sitting in the control room again at Euphoria, except instead of observing those shadowboard, underground fantasies, I'm watching the news: flames, war, etcetera, robot and human soldiers battling over shorelines and people to whom all of this is a science fiction novel or an insulting idea based on their bank accounts living, dying, dying more, the usual … and I see myself, sitting in that chair, with the blocky shit over my eyes and the cornea-based wires which I myself don't even *have* yet snaking through my cheeks like scars just screaming with no sound, mouth opening like that howler painting long surpassed by robot brushes with nothing but blackness snaking from between my lips, shouting, howling, silent …

As we're following Hans Karl, once I fall back asleep, anywhere he goes could be a catastrophe: is it the stores where he goes to shop for parts and download packs for the spectacle to beef the hardware like new tires, hoods, decals for his car? Is it the diner where we saw a dissatisfied customer pop a normal, no offense cap into the server who screwed his order? Meanwhile, as we're following him like a placenta tied to an umbilical cord from his wounded psyche, calls to our cell phones, the same one Leo chucked into that lake, show with area coes equal to Philly, equal to Baltimore, places from my past that I have no business with correlating to

my ex-wife's ability to leak my digits … and instead of stopping anywhere, it's perpetual following, every step something we can witness but seemingly do nothing about from our front seats, like a ball hitting the back of a soccer net inches from the fingertips of two goalies who should've had the foresight to slow down time and dive the other way …

I wake up in a sweat that covers my body, the kind where the sheets are sticky and the air conditioning does nothing for the smell. I consider the fact that, if I were to uncork the bottle of liquor I used on the night I explored Gerald's ability to live forever, took the burning like a man for once in my life and swallowed the whole thing, and then went back to sleep in a way where I'd wake up every three or four and a half hours, gravity might win and I might finally get out of this in a way that is *accidental.* I push the thought out of my mind, but consider, with my arms behind my head and my chest pounding faster than it needs to, causing my high and lower back to tingle from the spine pressure, how everyone sits in their own little boxes at this point … we're all just pieces of a puzzle who no longer need to join, and worse, no longer want to, because if I don't like the fact my life in this mold smelling, non-insulated apartment with old fashioned radiators older than my department, I can build myself a world where I am a king by solely giving Sir Alex or, if I don't want to move and be a plebian, Gerald Lieber, of all people, my credit card … and when someone's server gets downed and they crash back into reality like a diver accidentally mistaking glinting ice for depth, what happens to that person then when the world is simply here, turning on in a way that's not a show, nor a movie, where their mother's still dead, their father's still an asshole, and their brain's still being forced to fit like a letter into a numerical array of matrices while all the people who lord over their own domains in their fake, camera based interpretations of reality, which is an argument from definition without reconciliation at this point, right, what happens when that cord gets cut and the music allowing separation from the silence of the world we've broken, the violent kind, the one that echoes after the gunshot, suddenly *stops*?

The cost of cochlear implants with wiring, according to Google on Hans Karl's spectacle, is $22,346 dollars without accelerants and without incorporating network compatibility. This is the equivalent of nearly 46 days at Euphoria if one solely purchases a chair, with one's spine already curved from parental tobacco smoking in utero able to withstand not having a flat bed to fuck on. Since losing access to his father's credit card earlier this morning, Hans Karl, whose eyes are puffy and whose voice is hoarse and who hears the reverberations from the 'love' shack outside echoing across the driveway with the window open, pushed in by the frigid air, has realized that from family holiday and birthday checks, from his mother's social security payments and life insurance which he can't quite access yet since

his father owns it, yet gave him a slight allowance which “is going to be delayed next month,” and from his own efforts as a metaversal architecture tutor in private practice, he currently has enough money for four more days at Euphoria without yet testing the waters for how far over his parentally established credit line he could push it before MetaBank shuts him down. According to the calculation of one’s FICO score, going over to a certain degree would lock his credit tanking at a certain numerical percentage, which is exactly 28% more than any fucks Hans Karl Lieber has left to give at this juncture, so when he enters the sandbox and meets with the guinea pigs, he draws a bunch of bobble headed, antenna fingered, mutant green aliens and has them sit in the barn where he killed Farmer Faber with his own animal collective – which, by the way, will look like child’s play compared to the morning, not by the body count, but thanks to the creativity exercised onto these fucking unreal pieces of *shit* – and has them teach the aliens the best thing humanity ever did was learn to count. The guinea pig taps on a chalkboard amidst the unsmelling hay, glasses over its face like a college professor gone feral, and says A = 1, B = 2, C = 3, D = 4 … and they draw a picture of the world, an earth with continents as squiggly lines, and in the same voice as piggums drawing on that wall, the guinea pig says to the puppy-head-tilted aliens, “the antichrist walks among us and is sitting in the *mirrors*!” …

In the morning, we tail the kid as he goes through his morning routine: masturbation, shower, teeth brushing, in that order, for whatever reason, while monitoring any activity in, out, on, or around his internet connection. No threats, no real movement in the morning hours, but when he gets closer to lunch time, something strange happens: without asking his father, he says he’s heading back out to “do the dirty usual,” and Gerald says something about him *needing to count his blessings and use his funds wisely*, asking him something about getting a job, and when Hans Karl tells him he’s going to become a test subject at a neurology clinic, his father just scoffs and tells him *stay off the drug simuls*. Hans Karl doesn’t even argue it. Instead, he stands on his porch, well out of view of our robot bird tweet tweet twittering into the bipolar warmth of the fall afternoon, snowless and pristine, and the robot driver which picks him up from his house drives him not to Euphoria, but rather to this place in town called EYE YOUR FEAST! It’s a restaurant, apparently, where people pay a cover charge, and those with implants are able to hook up to a Spectacle and order *anything* they want: premium sashimi, imagine truffles and caviar just spilling into one’s gullet, literally those who pay the most, which is like $60 or $70 maximum, can have an entire hour’s worth of experiential tasting from Gordon Ramsay and Emeril menus, their own visages preserved for eternity, and have the thrill of eating with fullness meters that stretch their stomachs but never

get them *full*. At the flick of a button, they can have the *sensation* of fullness, the desire to pass out from their brain being triggered, the taste of delicious food igniting their tastebuds with everything but true, natural texture accounted for, and then un-fill themselves, re-fill themselves, and eat like kings, lords, emperors, and queens, even! We surreptitiously tail the Uber driver through what used to be, according to the records Leo's reading, a forested, quiet area now jam-packed with similar entertainment venues, and on the moving facsimile, we hear Hans Karl talking to the robotic driver about how he *ate an entire pack of tasty cakes in one sitting when his parents argued*.

"No ballistics?" I ask, already positioned at a café next to the restaurant, drinking my flat white with the still-human baristas thinking I'm an artist of some kind, where if there were still newspapers, I'd be reading one.

"No," Leo says.

"And who is he meeting there?"

"He told his father he wanted to take his automatron stepmother out to lunch."

"Once and future mother," Braise says, rolling his eyes from the passenger seat next to Leo. "Gerald was nearly crying from his son's charge of heart, his *kindness!*"

"At taking his robot mother's reincarnation out to lunch," I repeat, scoffing. "Look, she's actually taking an Uber herself too that the *kid* paid for."

Mrs. Lieber's reincarnation, the same black haired, white German looking one that Mr. Lieber custom ordered like a black and teal BMW, and with the same objectification, gives a non-awkward handshake to Hans Karl, happily saying, without the cigarette pressed between her fingers, "I've *never* been to *this* place before!"

"You're gonna love it," Hans Karl says, dressed in a weirdly m'lady fedora on his head covering his already-patterned baldness and with his collared shirt more a drapery in front of his large stomach. "They're going to think I *invented* food by the time we're done today!"

The still-human, $7.25 waiters take them to a pleasant booth, with Hans Karl explaining that he hasn't got the implants, but that his automatron sorta-kinda stepmother, perfectly astute and receptive despite his father's went-back-to-bed tiredness from the night before, is being treated for her excellent service to his father and their family. With this, the waiter explains how the smell, taste, texture, and sight menu matches *perfectly* with her programming, and that even the residual nature of her experience will be enough to make it worth Hans Karl shelling out $60 to give her the *full experience*.

“Well,” Hans Karl says, placing his own credit card on the table with a smack like a player turning over the best hand in hold-‘em. “My mother always told me to treat my *dates* like gold – and this one here, she’s a *platinum tier!*”

“Hansy,” The automatron says, flicking her eyelids. “You Lieber men sure do know how to treat women!”

The waiter takes the credit card and taps it in the machine with a loaded silence between them, but as it clears, he says, “You two enjoy yourselves now!” as the Spectacle device is brought out by two other grunts on a literal, actual silver platter. The chatter of the restaurant, the *oh my gods* and the salivating, smacking lips of those engaged in the simulation on either sides of their booths, the gilded drool cups included and keepable as souvenirs of the greatest time this side of the ripcord ethernet, the *this is fucking to die fors* emphatically expressed by the people on the dates, those help fill the anticipation of the program loading and Mrs. LieberBot saying, “You know, Hans Karl, I think I’m going to go for the *Wolfgang Puck* menu!”

“Do as you please,” Hans Karl says, and he’s on his phone tapping some things we can’t see. Of the apps that we can see on his phone from our covertware, the local cops as well joining in, there’s nothing really out of the ordinary aside from this one application he’s been crafting called PigWare, with the face of a guinea pig with two dark dotted eyes in a cartoonish fashion staring up like a children’s cartoon into his face. As the Spectacle connects and Mrs. Liebrer chooses only the finest smoked salmon pizza to be materialized across her tastebuds, fake and fake joining so that it feels ultra *real*, Hans Karl taps the application, and Mrs. Lieber begins phantom chewing in the way her flesh and blood owner might feel the first time he unwrapped her ‘flawless’ stomach.

“You want to know something funny?” Hans Karl asks, crossing his arms and smiling like an album cover for sadboys. “My father goes to sleep every night in the same place my mother died, in that house.”

“Not *every* night,” Mrs. Lieber says, giving a little *cu-cough* as she sits her shoulders back against the satin booth in pleasure with a little squeak. “Oh my goodness, Hans Karl, this ‘food’ is *delectable!*”

“Of course, not *every* night,” Hans Karl says, clicking the volume button up on his phone one notch despite nothing being played. From across the street, Braise narrows his eyes, and Leo keeps his hands perfectly at 10 and 2 on the parked car’s steering wheel. I sit up in my metal lattice chair next door, outside, and press the earpiece closer into my ear, thinking that’ll even do something. “And you know, the strange thing was, my mother would *belch* when she was upset!”

“She was a complicated woman,” Mrs. LieberBot says. “Can I choose another item?”

“The banquet is yours,” Hans Karl replies, as the waiter arrives with his real-life water. Hans Karl turns in his seat to the waiter, his mid-20s face smiling at Mrs. LieberBot’s enjoyment, and asks, “Say, can I get a water *without* lemon?”

“Of course, Mr. Lieber,” the waiter says. “I will be right back!”

“What’s next on the menu?” Hans Karl asks.

“Steak,” Mrs. LieberBot says, with a silly smile across her thin, non-brittle jawline. “I feel like I’m *cheating*, in more ways than *one!*”

“Well, *you* aren’t related to me!” Hans Karl says, smirking, clicking the volume button four more times as the guinea pig on the app actually *blinks*. He stares at the automatron’s flat stomach, and he says, “You know, one thing that irked me about yesterday that I told my therapy-bot is that my mother *smoked* with me in the *womb*.”

Mrs. Lieber waves her ringless hand in front of her face as if to brush away crumbs from Hans Karl’s words, as the waiter returns with the water and also a goblet to catch her hyper-realistic saliva. “Don’t take it *personally*,” Mrs. LieberBot says. “Your father said it to me with confidence: both he and her should be burning in *hell* for what you experienced, and unfortunately, you were just *collateral damage* for their actions.”

“That’s the term they use for it,” Hans Karl says, picking the phone up and weighing it like he’s ready to chuck it through the window. “Say, MotherBot,”

“Mmmmmmm,” The automatron says, as if she’s just bit down on bone. “Please, Hans Karl, don’t call me that.”

“Apologies,” Hans Karl says, opening the pig app and staring at the blank face of what one of them must’ve looked like in the barn if it were *burning*. “Say, *Madame*, did you know that epidural hematomas were *worse* than subdural hematomas?”

“By my programming, I automatically know that, but the error committed by your father, which you’ve been so brutally obsessive about,” she says, pausing her chewing. “Could have been committed by *any* human being!”

“Right, but I just expected a Fide Master with an Ivy League degree to care about nuance.”

The automatron shrugs, before patting her stomach quizzically, as if a baby inside it just kicked. “Well, in the classically human way, *shit happens!*”

“Indeed it does,” Hans Karl says. “And I’ve known my whole life I’m the *shit*.”

“That’s the spirit!” Mrs. Lieber says, except now, *she* puts her fist in front of her mouth and looks around for the waiter. “I didn’t know I selected a *spicy* option!” In the booths nearby, the other robotic customers, originally

indistinguishable from their human counterparts, paramours, children, caretakers, are all either shifting in the booths or holding their napkins in front of their faces, their cheery, natural rhythms of their speech now staggered and glitching like a lagging video in four dimensions. Then, Hans Karl says, placing his phone in the center of the table as Mrs. LieberBot quizzically looks down, he says, “In your *objective*,” he taps the table twice. “Evaluation, as required by subsection 427 dash D of the Automaton Legal Code, if two parents smoked with their child in the womb, allowed the kid to crack its head on their watch, argued in front of it for up to eight hours at a time, and mistakenly did not report the accurate nature of a nearly fatal injury to professionals in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and then repeatedly blamed him and him alone for trauma inflicted as a *minor* child, is it irrational for the child to feel like perhaps he never should’ve been born at all?”

The LieberBot lurches in her booth seat towards the table, shaking her head no, and then yes, and then no, and then yes, as if the black and white pieces on the chessboard are arguing for the right to reconcile their differences into gray or some shit.

“KILL THE FUCKING NETWORK,” Braise shouts into our coms array. “DUNCAN, GET IN THERE!”

I don’t move.

I stay at my table outside with my hands in my pockets watching as the automatons, and *only* the automatons, buckle over at their tables, their stomachs feeling as though they’re stretching with bowling balls in them. The carnival cruise tropical island music playing on the loudspeakers, to match with the tiki theme of the week and the specials on *‘ExOtiC CuIsInE’* for people who live, statistically, within 20 minutes of their zipcode of birth their entire life, suddenly scratches to a halt, and as the automatons, following their programming but avoiding what was undesirable, pantomime vomiting on the floor, dishes clattering to the ground as their palms smack the carpet, rushing towards the bathrooms only to find them as *single uses*, gasp and grasp at the doorhandles, shouting “*apologies for my human-like error*” in tones of politeness mixed with pain across the restaurant, their metallic and wire-based faces twitching like they’re people, real flesh and blood versus wires and meatsacky combos, being electrocuted to the rhythm of the music now blaring from the speakers: *dun, dun da dun dun dun dun, dun da dun dun dun, dun dun, dunnnn, dun da dun dun dun dun, dun dun da dun dun, da dunnnn. Dun da dun dun, dun da-da dun dun, dun dun dun dun, dun dun dunnnnnn, dunnnnnn dun-da dun dun dun dun, dun da dun dun dunnnn, da dunnnn!* Hans Karl stands up over Mrs. LieberBot, who is now curled in the booth with her legs slightly opened, whatever she ate from the menu feeling like its an already full-

grown *child* in her womb, and Hans Karl says, bending slightly down over *it*, this robot, “Looks like the malfunction is nobody’s fault, all of you e-thots are just *collateral damage!*”

The Mrs. LieberBot contorts in pain while apologizing, opening her skirted legs as though her stomach being tricked into thinking there’s something in it is going to burst from her bellybutton like something out of *Predator*, and that’s when Braise, who is still shouting at me, watching this whole scene with an expressionless face and eyes so tired they could be drooping o my neckline, about how THAT’S AN ORDER DUNCAN, NEUTRALIZE HIM, GET HIM TO SIT DOWN, FUCKING STOP HIM, gets a ring on his cell phone.

“WHAT?” Braise asks.

“What in God’s creation is going on in there?” Gerald asks, his voice as shaken as a man on the other end of the receiver on a phonecall with the devil.

“Your son has decided today’s the fuckin’ day,” Braise says. “And so far, nobody’s been hurt?”

“Nobody?” Gerald asks, his voice choked. “My precious Matilda is haywiring!”

“It’s only the automatons,” Leo says, moving his hands to his pockets, pulling out a pack of Camel Gold cigarettes and a lighter, and before Braise can smack the cigarettes out of his hands as he rolls the window down. “And it’s coming from the *internet*. Reports are saying it’s the largest internal direct denial of service attack with some other nested *shit* they’ve ever seen on a public system.”

“Public?” Braise asks, as Mr. Lieber rages on the phone. “They left it unsecured?”

“No me jodas,” Leo says, laughing. “Public access wifi!”

From the speaker echoing, I can hear Mr. Lieber raging with more force than he ever did talking about his own error in his son’s treatment, with a kind of fury only a man sitting behind a screen could assume:

“ITS DESTRUCTION OF PROPERTY ON THE WIDEST LEVEL EVER SEEN. DO YOU KNOW HOW MUCH FUCKING MONEY IT TAKES TO BUILD ONE OF THOSE? AND THIS TWO BIT CREDIT SPENDING DAFT MOTHERFUCKER IS POPPING THEM LIKE BALLOONS AFTER A BIRTHDAY PARTY, I WILL SUE YOUR ENTIRE FUCKING DIVISION SO HARD YOU BLEED IF YOU I STOP HIM NOW!”

“WHAT?” Leo sceams, pounding the center console with a closed fist as Braise vibrates with suppressed, obstinate laughter in the passenger seat. “You’re trying to tell me the fucking *robots* have *feelings?*”

“They loved me better than my wife ever could have!”

Leo SLAMS the console with the phone in his hand four times as Braise opens the passenger window and hacks like he has lung cancer out

the window. “I HAD THE CHEERLEADER PLAY MY ASSHOLE LIKE A TUBA, THERES NO WAY A LIVING WOMAN WOULD EVER ENJOY THAT!”

Braise chokes so hard on a laugh his Adam’s apple bobs as he nearly upchucks, and he sticks his head back in the window panting, while Hans Karl picks up the Mrs. Lieber automatrons hair like a clump of wires attached to a severed head up in his right fist inside the window, making a kissy face at the frozen, still smiling face of the automaton with her eyes rolled to white on their retina displays.

“Do we fire?” Asks the sniper team on the radio.

“No, nope,” Braise says, wiping tears from his eyes. “We’re all getting fired, but we are *not* killing Hans Karl!”

“Is this your fucking GOD?!?!” Hans Karl screams, as Mr. Lieber weeps saying *she was the latest software version, I* trained *her* SO WELL, *she was so PROUD of her DEVELOPMENT*. Hans Karl laughs, the first time I’ve heard it, a long-distance ringing sound from a time that can’t be gone back to, now. “YOU NORMAL BRAINED SHITSTAINS WANT THE BEST OF US AS *THIS?!?*”

As the sirens from the locals finally reach into view, echoing down to me, I follow Leo’s lead, reach inside my coat, prop my feet up on the underside of the table next to me, and as the human waitress, panic in her eyes, comes rushing out the front of the Starbucks, I calmly raise my hand to her, saying “don’t panic, everything will be just fine,” and as the local cops raid the store and the automatons stop twitching and Hans Karl kneels down with his hands behind his head, I calmly ask the waitress, “Do you people have a *tip* jar?”

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